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To Ambitious Bookkeepers and Junior Accountants—

ARE YOU GETTING AHEAD THE SPEEDY WAY

—OR THE SLOW WAY?

Here's how you can find out! Answer these questions:

- **Do you know *why* the management asks for each set of figures that you prepare?**
- **Do you see clearly *how* those figures will shape company policies?**
- **Do you daily *interpret* your books and your records in terms of profit and loss to your firm?**
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YOUR answers to those questions would give an experienced personnel man a picture of your entire future!

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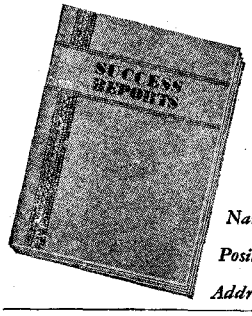

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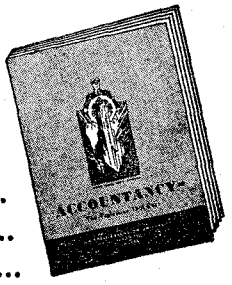

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 296 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 13, 1940 Number 2

Minions of Mars—*First of five parts*.....William Gray Beyer 6
Here's the story you've been clamoring for—the return of Mark and Omega in a fine new sequel to "Minions of the Moon"

Men of Daring—*True Story in Pictures*.....Stookie Allen 27
Wilburn Cobb and "The World's Largest Pearl"

When the River Ran White—*Short Novel*...Harry Sinclair Drago 28
. . . then the fur-wolves howled in their safety and the Law's only weapon was a Redcoat with a divided mind and an undivided heart

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No SOS tonight; death has stilled the key

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Cover by Rudolph Belarski

Illustrating When the River Ran White

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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WILLIAM T. DEWART, President

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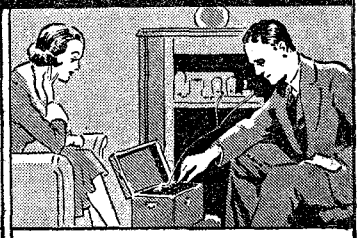
I jumped from $18 a week to $50
-- a Free Book started me toward this
GOOD PAY IN RADIO

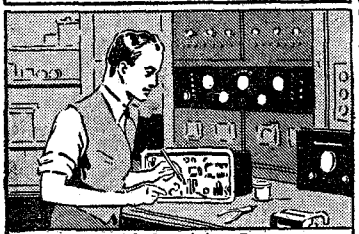
HERE'S How it Happened

by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

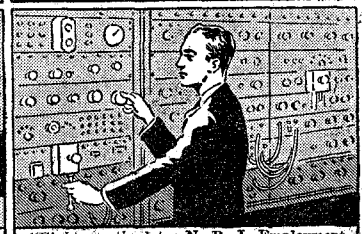
"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in *Radio* and *started training at home for* them."



"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio Sets."



"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N. R. I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUL. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."

"N. R. I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast."

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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and service men. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loud-speaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

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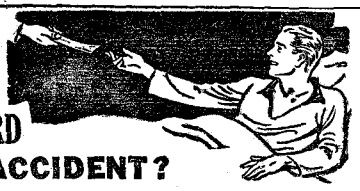

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29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
6.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
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33x4	2.95	1.25
34x4	3.25	1.35
32x4½	3.35	1.45

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6.50-20	4.45	1.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95
ALL OTHER SIZES		

Size	Tires	Tubes
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33x4½	3.45	1.45
30x5	3.45	1.65
33x5	3.45	1.75
35x5	3.95	1.75

Size	Tires	Tubes
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36x7	10.95	4.65
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40x8	13.25	4.95

Size	Tires	Tubes
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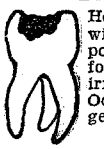

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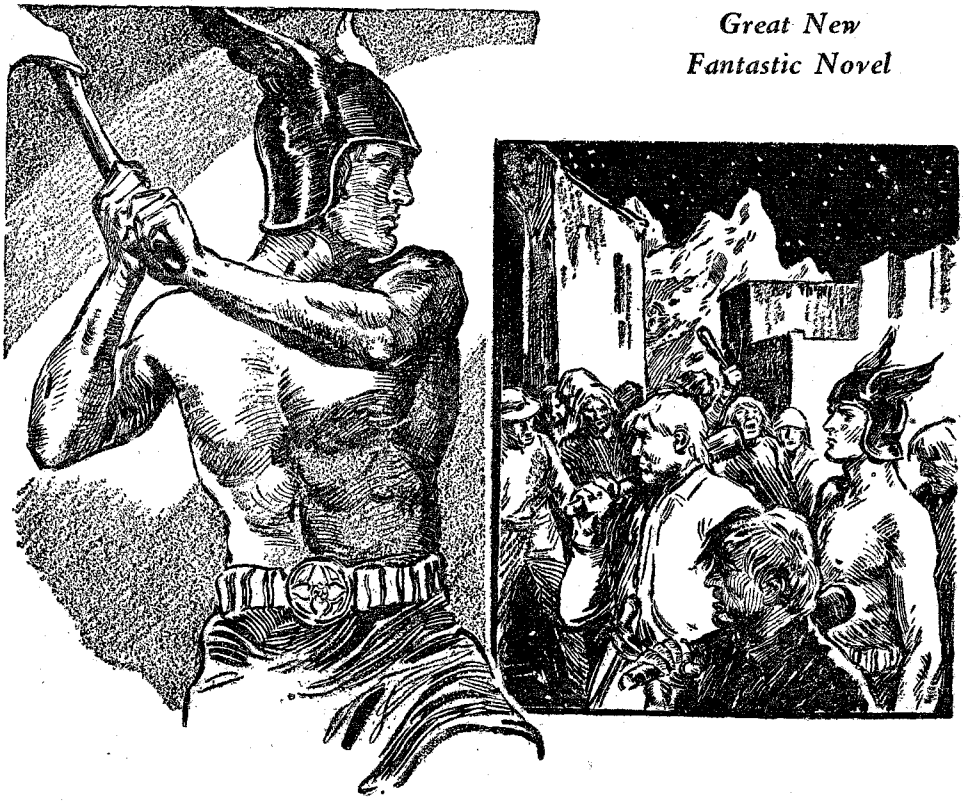

Minions of Mars

By WILLIAM GRAY BEYER

Rip Van Winkle was a mere cat-napper compared to Mark Nevin who went to sleep in 1939 and woke up six thousand years later. That was confusing enough without being elected by a prankish, disembodied intelligence to be the father of the future race, and chosen by a smooth-tongued rebel as king of a crazy country Mark had never even heard of. A sparkling and fast-moving tale of adventures in the Days to Come. . . .

FOREWORD

Mark Nevin, away back in the twentieth century A.D., had a stomach ache. Then his doctor diagnosed his ailment as appendicitis and persuaded Mark to be the first to try his new anaesthetic. Something slipped, and Mark slept peacefully on in a blissful state of suspended animation.

While Mark was napping, a cataclysmic war broke out that shattered civilization.

Things were a little better when Mark finally did come to, but he might have fared badly just the same but for the intervention of one Omega, a disembodied intelligence.

He selects Mark to be the father of the neo-man and chooses the lovely Nona as his mate, which is agreeable as Mark has already fallen in love with her. He imparts a radio-active element to their blood.

With Mark as leader, Omega enlists an army of Vikings to wipe out two malignant intelligences which threaten to destroy the world. Victorious, the Vikings, Mark and Nona take their leave of Omega and sail for home.

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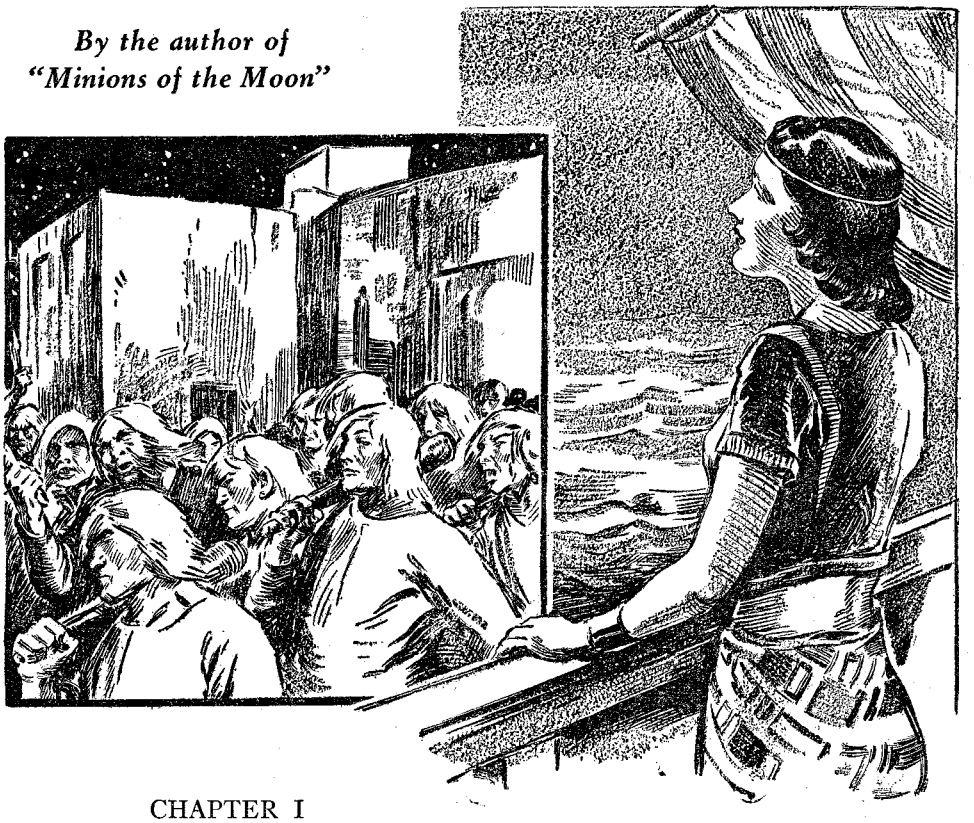
By the author of
"Minions of the Moon"



CHAPTER I

HAIL FELLOW

A LONE figure stood atop the little knoll and gazed in perplexity at the distant city. Eyes shaded from the glaring light of the rising sun, he seemed to be seeing a sight beyond understanding. He turned back and as he did so, the golden light of the sun caught the play of powerful muscles under his bronzed skin. Brief leather trunks, as pliable and almost as close-fitting as his own skin, were held by a broad belt from which hung a shiny hand-axe. He wore no other clothing except a helmet, adorned with wings and considerably battered.

His face was as strong as his smoothly muscled body. The clear, blue eyes were baffled, haunted by a persistently elusive memory. He seemed to have forgotten everything he ever knew. It had taken him, for instance, more than a day to remember his own name. It had only come to him a few hours ago. Mark Nevin. And now, as his hand brushed the axe in turning, he caught the fleeting recollection that he had been known as Mark the Axe-thrower. The axe-thrower—idiotic! But of course there was the axe—but whom did he throw it at—and why?

Experimentally, he drew the axe and let fly at a sapling fifty yards away. It was a tremendous throw, but he didn't know that. Nor was he much surprised when the axe sped true and sheared through the four-inch tree. His only emotion, as he retrieved the weapon, was a certain satisfaction that he had earned his name. Mark, the Axe-thrower, it was. Whatever that meant.

Briefly he inspected the axe before returning it to his belt. There was something he should remember about it; something he couldn't quite grasp. The weapon was a solid piece of metal. Its entire surface was gleaming with a tarnish-proof

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luster. Stainless steel, he would have called it if he could have remembered the term. But he couldn't.

There was some association here, but no amount of concentration would bring it to the fore. Only the dim thought struggled to the surface, that here was a thing of great antiquity. And he wondered how he knew that. For the axe was as shiny as one made and polished an hour ago. One thing he did know, and that was that he must not distrust these vague recollections of his. There was a lot to remember, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that someone, somewhere, depended on him to remember.

HE COULD see that someone and he knew her name. She had been with him since his first conscious memory yesterday morning. The vision of her loveliness had been with him in the salty water as he swam toward the land he was now exploring. Even then he had known her name—Nona.

But no amount of thinking had brought the slightest added knowledge. It was very irritating to recall her so perfectly, and not actually to know the slightest thing about her.

Discontentedly, he turned and faced the distant city. There he would find human beings. And it was most likely that among humans he would find the thought associations that would stir his tantalizing memory.

There were no workers in the tilled fields about the city. Nor any movement in the harbor on his left. The sun made long shadows of the masts of these vessels, and the rippling of the waves turned the shadows into writhing snakes. But there was no other motion.

There was an explanation for this gloomy quiet, and a simple one at that. It was still early, and the inhabitants of the city were simply still in bed. But even if this simple fact had been explained to him, he would have found it strange. For Mark was not the same as other men in this respect. He didn't waste the sunless hours of the night in stupor. He was as active then as he was in the daytime.

Mark was not even aware that normal men needed sleep and food. For in the short day and night of his conscious existence he had done none of these things, and had felt no loss. He was a self-sufficient machine, and he felt marvelously fit and vigorous as he strode rapidly toward the city.

Mark, with the childlike trust of the innocent or the not-quite-bright, made no attempt to be stealthy.

He was walking beside a broad, cobbled path. This was an ox-cart road, he recognized, and then wondered how he knew. There were no ox-carts to be seen. And certainly in the day and night of his memory he had seen no such conveyances, nor the roads on which they traveled.

Somewhere beyond that day and night such things must have been familiar.

The sight of the cobbles seemed to touch some familiar chord, and experimentally he stepped on them. They were uncomfortable to his bare feet, and he moved back to the smooth dirt by the side of the road. Then the struggling memory came to the surface.

It was the smooth feel of the caked dirt which carried the association. For an instant he seemed to see a road stretching endlessly into the distance. Rushing along its hard, smooth surface were wheeled vehicles, traveling at breakneck speed.

The vision passed, and with its passing came the realization that the road he had seen and the automobiles moving on it, were things of antiquity equal to that of his axe. Such things no longer existed, he was acutely aware. And yet he felt that even with the knowledge that thousands of years had gone since their existence, nevertheless he had seen such roads and traveled in such cars. This was getting more unnerving at every second, and he decided that unless he could remember everything at once, it would be more comfortable not to remember anything at all.

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The cobbled road led directly between two buildings at the edge of the city. It continued as a street, narrow and shadowy. Mark walked on, intent on finding men. And men he found, though not quite in the way he had expected. He had gone perhaps a half-mile, when abruptly a horde of yelling maniacs catapulted from an alley and bore him to the ground!

THERE had been no warning, and the thing was so sudden that he hadn't had time even to let out a yip of protest. Then he was lying wonderingly beneath a ton or so of evil smelling humanity and waiting patiently for further developments. He felt no more resentment, than he had felt pain from the beating he had taken.

His assailants were more surprised than he. Surely, thought they, a man of such tremendous physique would require mighty strenuous subduing. Disappointed and a little relieved, too, they lifted themselves off their prisoner's body. Two of them eased their feelings by cuffing him as they rose. The blows, while vigorous, caused only a momentary twinge and Mark blissfully ignored them. He was busy watching the astonished expressions on their faces, as he sprang, unmarked and unhurt, to his feet.

This was not a new experience, he realized, noticing that several of his attackers were holding short clubs in their hands. Sometime in the past men had attacked him with weapons and had been surprised that he had emerged unscathed. For the first time he sensed the fact that he was in some manner different from other men. That for some unaccountable reason he was hardier and less easily damaged. This, he decided, was probably a good thing.

"Hoorya?" suddenly demanded the foremost of his captors. "Mac or Mic?"

Mark frowned momentarily. Then he grinned. For into his continually astonishing brain had popped the knowledge that a Mac was a Scotchman and a Mic, an Irishman.

"Yank," he answered, and then wondered why he said it. In his head came the sound of a baseball popping off a bat, although Mark didn't realize what it was.

"No such!" declared the other. "Sgo!"

Whereupon his attackers closed in fore and aft, and marched him down the street, clubs held menacingly. Mark was still grinning as he walked between them. He wanted to go into the city anyway.

His eyes fell on the leader of the crowd and he was surprised to note that the beefy one was carrying his axe. He hadn't known he had lost it, but realized that it had probably been wrenched from his belt during the short scuffle. Somehow the axe didn't seem a dangerous weapon in the leader's possession. He wondered if he was also immune from damage by axe-cuts. It annoyed him that he couldn't remember why he was different from normal humans.

Right now he resolved not to let the axe get out of his sight. He knew that somehow it was connected with the past, and that he mustn't lose it.

Here and there as they marched, a sleepy-looking head would poke out of a window to see what the night-watch had caught. Mark grinned at them, one and all, and usually got a startled look in reply. His captors were very military in their manner, assiduously keeping in step. They were burly and dressed in ill-fitting uniforms of coarse cloth, and armed with daggers which were fastened in their belts, in addition to the short clubs.

Mark, with his vast splotches of ignorance, could not, of course, know that it was not exactly military in the most rigorous tradition for the guards to chatter like monkeys as they marched. Some of the words and expressions they used were unfamiliar ones, but most of their conversation Mark was able to translate into intelligible meaning. This puzzled him for a while, but as their words became more understandable he forgot about it. They were talking English, he knew, and the reason it sounded strange was probably that they spoke a dialect he had never

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heard. It didn't occur to him that he was listening to English as it was spoken several thousand years after he had learned the language as a boy.

The conversation centered about him. Guesses were being made as to what manner of man he might be; and why he hadn't suffered from the cudgel blows they had administered; and finally as to what disposition might be made of him by the local magistrate. Quite a few guesses were made concerning the last, and they varied all the way from slavery in the fields to burning at the stake. One fellow, on Mark's left, voiced the opinion that the proper punishment for his crime of breaking curfew, should be a term in the king's army.

"That's no punishment!" exclaimed the man next to him, although he didn't say it in quite that way. "The army lives high."

"I know it," replied the other, complacently. "But when I tell the magistrate what I saw, that's what he'll say, too."

"What did you see?"

The first man carefully drew forth his knife. Mark noticed that it was stained with a bluish streak along its cutting edge. The stain seemed to sparkle with an iridescent sheen. The second guardsman looked at it stupidly.

"That's where I sliced him on the shoulder," explained the first man. "Look at the shoulder. The left one."

MORE curious than they, Mark twisted his head to look at it too. There was a smear of the same bluish substance, but no cut. It had healed in such a short time that only a teaspoonful of blood had been spilled. One of the watchmen was also looking at the smear spot, his face portraying a certain amount of awe intermingled with profound respect.

"It's only a scratch," he murmured. "What bothers me is that blue stuff. You don't suppose he bleeds *blue*, do you?"

"It was no scratch," his friend insisted. "You know I always take a good slash when the sergeant isn't looking. Now wouldn't this lad make a soldier?"

The other shrugged. "Blue," he muttered, unhappily. "Gorm."

Mark's brow was creased in a deep frown. Dimly he was grasping another section of his vanished past. Blood, he knew, should be red, not an iridescent blue. And this blood of his, which refused to follow the rules, had something to do with his differing from normal mortals. Was he really the freak these idiots seemed to think him?

He hardly noticed when they turned into a large courtyard, and stopped before a huge door of oak, studded and banded with iron. The sergeant hammered on it with his club, while the rest of them relaxed as if they expected a long wait.

Mark's mind was going like blazes. Because he was remembering. Remembering a period of intense pain. He was remembering also the serious face of old Doc Kelso, who wanted his permission to use his new anaesthetic in the performance of the appendectomy he must undergo. It was all coming back. . . .

Abruptly he was snapped to the present. A club-blow between the shoulder blades almost knocked him down. He caught himself, however, and spun round in fury. Blast them. Just as it was all coming back, too. He stopped short at the sight of a dozen drawn daggers. Perhaps it wouldn't be smart to test the peculiar power of his blood against so many of those knives. After all, why become hash merely because of overconfidence? And in that moment of hesitation he was forced through the now open portal.

Mark caught a fleeting glimpse of a small room with a table at which were seated three soldiers playing cards. A fourth was swinging open another massive door of oak. Mark was given a shove through this one also. A short, dark corridor led them past a series of barred doors, from behind which Mark heard a variety of snores, all in different keys. Before he had a chance to wonder where he was being led, he found himself thrust forcibly into an unoccupied cell.

The door clanged shut and the sound

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of retreating footsteps mingled with the nasal serenade.

CHAPTER II

FOOTPRINTS IN TIME

IN THE course of the world's history there have been many methods of propulsion through water. Fish have used fins and tails almost since time began. Squid-like creatures utilize rocket propulsion, by swelling a muscle-lined bladder with water and then squeezing it out again. Man's earliest attempts involved the use of both hands and feet in swimming. A more advanced effort consisted of lying prone on a short log and paddling with the hands. Then some inspired genius hit upon the idea of hollowing out the log and paddling with shaped paddles.

From this crude beginning the evolution of boats probably has paralleled very closely the cultural advance of the race. For with the improvement in boats came an interchange of ideas between groups far removed from each other. Thus it was that when man had attained his highest cultural status during the waning years of the twentieth century, travel over and through water had also reached its peak of efficiency.

But when the peoples of the world decided to war upon one another, as these boats were the ultimate in transportation, so was this war the ultimate in destruction. Thus it was that with the end of the war man found himself cast back almost to the point when he was propelling a dugout with a paddle.

That was the last war for many a year. It was so completely destructive, so devastating, that when it had at last burnt itself out, man had sunk to such low estate that he could think of nothing to fight about except the immediate necessities of life.

But ships, ever the measuring-rod of man's progress, had again started their slow evolution toward the ultimate perfection they must some day regain. And the culture of man was keeping step.

The first morning rays of a golden sun caught the upper portion of a huge, sagging squaresail, and touched it with fire. A man from the tenth century would have found the ship to have some familiar characteristics, but only a person living in the eightieth century would have recognized it for what it was. A vessel of the north-country sea-rovers—peopled by yellow-haired giants who would rather do battle than eat—and who had prodigious appetites.

The ship was becalmed, and this was a vessel which need never be becalmed. Its sides were lined with a single row of long oars, now cocked at an angle, so that the blades were well out of the water. The rigging of the sail, which was far more scientific and manageable than any used by tenth-century Vikings, allowed it to make use of the slighest current of air, and in any direction except straight ahead.

APATHY reigned among the voyagers on this ship. No definite course of action had been decided upon. A difference of opinion existed concerning whether they should return to their home port or continue the fruitless search that had occupied them for the past day and night. There was the urge to keep searching but in each was the knowledge that it was futile. For no man could swim in the open sea for a day and a night.

Leaning against a short section of rail, and gazing with tragic eyes out over the waves, stood a young woman, beautiful even in her grief. The yellow-haired Norsemen, sprawled wearily about on the deck, glanced occasionally at her, and then quickly looked elsewhere. It was her man who had been lost, but they were able to feel her grief almost as acutely as she. For the lost man was Mark, the Axe-thrower, favored of Thor, and the personal hero of every man on board.

Nona's lovely body reflected the weariness she endured as she left the rail and made for her cabin. But hers was only a fatigue of mind, manifesting itself in a body that was really tireless. Her blood

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was charged with the same cell-renewing element that made Mark the perfect physical machine that he was. But so grueling had been the waiting and hoping that she imagined fatigue where no fatigue could be. Wearily she slumped into a soft chair. Hope had fled, and there remained only a numbing, tearless grief.

Then abruptly she sprang to her feet, one hand stifling an involuntary scream. Across the room, squatting in a corner, was a creature that would have raised terror in the stoutest of humans.

Superficially the thing was an enormous spider, fully two feet across the body. Superficially, insofar as it possessed eight legs attached to its bulbous cephalothorax. But different, in that it had six tentacles, three on a side, on its upper surface.

Each of these members was about three feet long and was divided at the end into two flexible prehensile fingers. And different also, by reason of the segmented, chitinous armor which covered the body. But, spider or no spider, the thing was a witch's fancy, the hideous product of a creator gone mad. Nona thought perhaps she ought to scream anyway. So she did.

"Calm yourself, girl," came a voice from the general direction of the creature. "It's only me . . . Omega. I just wanted to see how a human would react to the sight of one of the former inhabitants of the moon. This was my original body, you know. I assume you're not exactly in favor of it?"

Nona slumped again into the chair. "Oh, it's you," she said irritably. "Don't you know this isn't any time for your silly tricks?" She winced at the sight of him. "And whatever that thing is you're wearing, please destroy it."

"It was destroyed more than five hundred centuries ago," said the voice. "You know that. You might call this thing an astral projection—it's been dead so long. But really it's only a figment of *your* imagination."

"It's certainly no figment of *my* imagination, you celestial prankster. No self-respecting girl would ever work up a thing like that."

"You certainly did imagine it," Omega snapped pettishly. "I made you. And I'm not very pleased at the way you react to my natural body. I considered it quite handsome at one time. But then, I might have felt the same way about yours when I was young. But I've seen so many forms of life in the last five hundred centuries that they all seem natural to me now . . ."

While he talked, Omega caused the vision of the spider-like creature to vanish, and in its stead Nona saw the bent figure of an aged, bearded man. At the sight of this senile being she closed her eyes and relaxed. Then she burst our crying. Omega cocked a sympathetic eye at her. He hated weepy women, but if Nona had stooped to tears, there was a reason. "Nona, what's wrong?" he queried, gently.

"Mark . . ." She choked as she tried to tell him. "He's . . . he's dead!"

"Dead! What's he mean, the young loafer? He knows he can't die—it would upset all my plans. I'll show him! Where's the body? I'll bring him back . . ."

He stopped short as Nona, still sobbing, waved an arm toward the two portholes at the side of the cabin. Through them he could see the sunlit waves of the North Sea. Then, surprisingly, he chuckled.

"Fell overboard, eh?" He chuckled again. Nona looked at him in astonishment. "That's all right then. Now start at the beginning and tell me what happened."

NONA'S eyes widened in sudden hope, for Omega was something close to omnipotent to her, and if he said that Mark might not be dead . . .

Abruptly she broke into speech, nearly incoherent at first, but getting clearer as hope calmed her nerves. She told of the storm which had come up during their trip to Stadland, on the coast of Norway; of how the wind had driven the ship toward the south and west, far off its course.

Mark had made her keep to the cabin, and when he was lost she had known

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nothing of it until the storm had abated. Sven, the captain, had broken the news to her in the morning, and since then the ship had been searching, fruitlessly.

"Well, what are you worrying about?" demanded Omega, his wrinkled face beaming with an impish grin.

"He . . . Can't he drown?"

"Of course not. Drowning is suffocation. And how can a man who doesn't need air suffocate?"

"But Mark and I both breathe. And if I try to stop, my lungs go to work as soon as I stop thinking about it. I suppose it's the same with him."

"Of course," Omega agreed. "But that is only because there is a nerve center in your brain which controls such involuntary actions. The fluid which I injected into your veins didn't stop that from working, but it did remove the necessity of having a constant supply of oxygen. Therefore Mark's respiration would continue normally, but it wouldn't matter to him whether he was breathing air or water, or strawberry jam. He doesn't require oxygen for the function of his body.

"I told you once that your body and Mark's are burning the power from the radioactive element in your blood. You need no other fuel to keep you alive. No food and consequently no oxygen to support the combustion of that food. All you require is water, and Mark is getting plenty of that. Yes, indeed, I imagine he's getting enough water to last him a lifetime." He grinned happily.

"But it is sea water," objected Nona. "Wouldn't that . . ."

"No—it wouldn't," Omega said, impatiently. "I can't explain the exact nature of your present body chemistry. You couldn't understand it. But you know very well that you have lived without eating since I gave you that injection several months ago. So you should be willing to take my word that sea water is as safe for Mark as spring water."

Nona was smiling quietly now. Where another woman might have let herself go into hysterics from reaction, Nona's temperament forbade such a weakness. Normally calm and placid, she was busily telling herself that she had known it all the time. That Mark couldn't be dead. Only the grueling hours of constant searching could have made her temporarily lose hope. But even so she wanted to hear more assurance from Omega.

"It's October," she pointed out. "Cold and exhaustion . . ."

"Nonsense! Mark can't become exhausted. Not for several thousand years to come, anyhow. Radioactivity supplies his energy, more than he can use by muscular activity. He could swim the Atlantic without tiring! And as for cold . . ." Here Omega hesitated. "Take a look in that mirror." He leered at her unnervingly.

Nona obediently crossed the cabin to a highly ornamented full-length mirror. Her reflection showed a beautifully formed body, which womanlike, she briefly admired, even lifting a hand to tuck away a stray, ebon curl. She noted, too, the trimness of her attire. A short jacket of satiny material, which came as low as her lower ribs; then an expanse of tanned skin, beneath which was a loose-fitting pair of shorts of the same shiny cloth. But that was what all the women wore in the summer. The only difference was in the colors and—

"I see it's dawned on you," said Omega. "The temperature is somewhere near freezing. Even the tough lads out on the deck are better clothed than you."

"You mean that our blood protects Mark and me from cold?"

"Of course. You would have noticed it sooner or later, if I hadn't told you. Radioactivity doesn't depend on temperature, and as a result your sensory nerves aren't giving you any warning of discomfort because of the low temperature. Your chemistry operates with equal efficiency over a wide range of heat fluctuation."

"Then Mark is safe. But where *is* he?"

"How should I know? Suppose you go on deck and tell Sven to point the ship toward Norway. Tell him you've had a vision or something, and that you know

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that Mark is alive and will rejoin you, later. He worships Mark, and that will be a kindness. You can say that Thor himself has revealed that he has given Mark a mission to fulfill, and that he will return when he finishes.

"Sven will believe that a lot quicker than an explanation of the real facts. And in the meantime I shall go and find your missing husband. And keep your chin up. I dare say it's a very lovely one, although being a spider I wouldn't know."

There was a twinkle in Omega's aged eyes, to match the impish grin, when he abruptly vanished.

NONA sat still for a moment, smiling toward the place which Omega had just quitted. Then she opened the cabin door and stepped out. A moment later a flock of sea gulls which had been perched in the rigging, took sudden wing, startled by the wild shouts of joy that were rising from the deck.

Yet if Omega had returned and told them of the thing he had just discovered, those shouts might have turned to groans. Omega, a disembodied intelligence of the first order, had been perfectly confident that he could touch Mark's mind at once.

Such a mental feat was a problem of simple accomplishment to one of his intellect. Fifty thousand years of projecting his mind to the far ends of the universe, had given him a mind power not surpassed anywhere. His over-active curiosity concerning the myriad of life-forms that infest the endless number of worlds in a dozen galaxies, kept him always alert and always a dynamo of mental energy. And yet he couldn't contact Mark!

The mind-pattern that was Mark, had temporarily ceased to exist. For that mind-pattern was not complete without all its memories. If a disembodied intelligence can shudder, Omega came very close to it. For in that instant, the thought came to him that the only answer could be that he *was* dead, after all.

And Omega had become very attached to Mark.

In Mark and Nona he had pictured the means of populating the earth with a type of human far superior to the product that nature had blindly created. He had chosen them as Adam and Eve for this race of the future because of the dominating good in their characters. And now, it seemed, Mark had ceased to be.

But in the instant that this thought came into existence, Omega's brilliant mind rejected it. There could be another reason for his failure to contact the mind-pattern that he knew as Mark.

Since their last intercourse, Mark might have changed. His ideas, his fundamental philosophy of life might have altered for some reason, and thus created a mind-pattern that was unrecognizable. Omega rejected this also.

Only one alternative remained. Mark had been washed overboard. It was likely that he had received a sharp blow on the head as he went over. If this had happened, then it was possible that the blow could have damaged his brain. And the mind-pattern had changed as a consequence.

BUT this complicated things dreadfully. Concussion could cause a partial or even complete loss of memory. Fracture might do either, and in addition might result in irreparable damage to the brain tissue. Mark may have changed only to the extent of losing some of his memories, or he may have been reduced to a hopeless idiot. Either way Omega *must* find him. For he alone possessed the knowledge to restore him.

Not knowing the extent of the pattern change, Omega would have to mentally visualize a pattern containing Mark's present dominant characteristics. Then he would have to make contact with any being possessing that pattern. There was every chance that no living being would respond to such an imagined mind-pattern. And if one did, it would probably be the wrong man.

Yet it was the only way. He might have to project a million of them before he hit upon the proper one. But with an energy

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that was definitely not human, he set about the task.

For two days he labored mightily at his problem. He visualized patterns of the most simple structures, then advanced to others containing some of the memories that he knew were Mark's. Nothing resulted.

Exasperated, he went back again to the more simple patterns, thinking he might have failed to imagine some little detail. Then ahead again to more complicated ones.

Omega knew all about Mark. He had delved into the innermost recesses of Mark's memory until the mind and character of Mark were as familiar as his own. Each pattern he was forming contained more memories than the last. He had reached the point in the memory chain where Mark had met Nona, when he suddenly realized that he couldn't hope to succeed by the present method.

There was one pesky thing he had forgotten. And that was that Mark, wherever he was, now had some new memories of which he knew nothing. Since the time he had fallen overboard Mark had been experiencing things that Omega couldn't know about. This, of course, wouldn't make any difference ordinarily. Omega could always contact a familiar mind-pattern, even though years of time had passed and new experiences had partially changed its former structure. But that was because the new memories were only a small portion of the total memories of the pattern. In the present case the new memories would constitute almost the entire pattern.

But there was another way. And though Omega cringed mentally at the thought of trying it, he knew very well it was the only course he could take. The method lay in an ability he had discovered shortly after he and the other members of his dying race had cast off their bodies and had taken residence in the imperishable brain containers which now rested on a dead and airless moon. He, differing from his compatriots, hadn't been satisfied to stay there, whiling away the ages in abstract thought. His ego had ventured away from the brain which had given it birth, and he had gone forth to explore the universe.

He could think himself instantly to the far corners of the universe. He could construct and inhabit any sort of body he wished. And he had full control and use of the vast stores of energy which are everywhere in space.

And then, almost accidentally, Omega had discovered that he could travel about in time, as well.

He had tried it, gingerly at first, and found that there were decided limitations. He could observe past hapenings but could take no part in them. He couldn't take a body and mingle with the beings he was interested in, because he hadn't really been there when the things had happened. Nor could he force himself backward in time beyond the date of his own birth.

That fact had handicapped him, for he was young then, and therefore, couldn't go back very far into the history of any race he might be studying. But as far as it went, the ability had its uses.

But he had come to grief when he had tried to clear up a hazy point in the past of his own race. The event which he had wanted to watch had taken place within his own lifetime, and, in fact, was connected with some of his own past operations. The trouble came when he had run across his own former body in the course of his study.

The two identities, being so near alike, had merged! He had been forced to live his lifetime all over again, up to the point where he again existed as a bodiless entity. That had been a great nuisance and a hideous waste of time.

The experience had taught him an extreme caution in connection with this special ability. True, he had used it again a few times, when his curiosity had overcome his caution, but each time he had been half frightened to death for fear he might run into himself again.

And now, after thousands of years of

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aimless perambulating, the thought of having to repeat himself over again gave him a disembodied fit of ague.

He would, however, try it once again.

This process was, if anything, a longer one than the business of trying to match mind patterns. It was a simple thing to place himself in the position the ship had occupied during the storm. And he had the satisfaction of observing Mark's head strike the ship's rail a glancing blow as he was washed over. That would teach him to be more careful.

The fact that Mark almost immediately began to strike out in a firm, distance-covering stroke, proved that he was not greatly damaged. But the fact that he didn't once look around for the ship and try to reach it, also proved that he had no memory of it.

In the few moments from the time his head struck the rail until he began to swim, he had regained consciousness, devoid of memory!

And here began Omega's troubles. He couldn't speed up the course of events which had happened and were unchangeable. He couldn't observe them at high speed as one would a moving picture of the same events. He had to watch them as they happened.

Until Mark had found some spot where Omega could be reasonably sure that he would stay for a few days, he didn't dare jump back to the present and start a search for him. Mark might in the interim have moved to a distant point.

Then, just when Omega was satisfied that Mark would very likely remain for a few days in Scarbor, inasmuch as he had followed him as far as the edge of the city and witnessed his capture, events started happening which made him decide he had better watch for a while longer.

CHAPTER III

IRON BARS DO NOT A PRISON MAKE

MARK gazed around the gloomy interior of his cell. It was devoid of furniture, though it wasn't entirely unadorned. In one corner there was a contraption of chains and manacles fastened to the wall. On the floor underneath was a pile of human bones and a jawless skull. Mark gulped. "Hello," he said to the skull. "Fine day." But the skull only grinned, with a knowing look to its empty sockets.

Whenever Mark straightened up, he banged his head on the ceiling. The cell had a foul smell, too. Altogether he was disinclined to stay for any great length of time. His eyes returned to the skull, he leaned over, picked it up, and looked absently into the eyeless sockets. They seemed to look back at him with a prophetic expression. He hastily returned the thing to its place on the top of the heap. No, he wasn't going to like this place.

Mark crouched on the chilly floor and tried to remember more about himself.

He didn't succeed very well, because every time he was on the track of something, the vision of the lovely lady intruded. And every time he saw her, she became clearer and more desirable, until she was like an ache in his heart.

Little memories came back.

Once he saw her breaking twigs and arranging them as if to build a fire. Again she would be swinging along at his side, as they made their way through a dense wood. . . . That woman who was so desirable, was his! There was no doubt of it now. And he must find her. Somewhere in the confused past lay the clue that would lead to her. He must remember!

He sank deep in thought.

As the morning sun rose higher in the sky, it became lighter in the cell. Mark was startled out of his reverie by the sight of another row of cells, on the opposite side of the corridor. The one directly across from his contained an unkempt individual who was leaning against the bars of the cell door, regarding Mark with a quizzical expression. A fiery shock of red hair threatened to cut off his vision, although he evidently could see through it, for he grinned when he realized that Mark saw him.

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MARK grinned back. He thought he should say something, but couldn't think of anything. Red-head broke the silence. "A new customer," he observed. "What are you in for?"

This one spoke in a new dialect, but Mark translated it automatically into the English of his youth.

"I don't know," Mark confessed. "They just grabbed me and hauled me in."

"Didn't they beat you up?"

"No. Just a few blows with their clubs."

"You're lucky. You must have broke curfew, and they usually jump a curfew breaker and beat him up before he knows what's happening."

"Why?"

"Serious offense," explained the other. "They're all so scary in this place that they pass laws to keep everybody off the streets after dark. The only ones who break curfew are thieves and murderers. And the night-watch always beats them up—when they catch them."

"I see . . . But they didn't catch me after dark. The sun had been up for quite a while."

"It's still curfew time now," informed the red-head. "The gong rings at about eight at night, and then it doesn't ring in the morning until about seven. There it goes now!"

A deep-throated chime filled the air of the cell-room with its throbbing vibration.

"I'm Murf," volunteered the red-head. What's your name?"

"Mark."

The sound of the gongs had awakened other inmates of the prison.

In the cell next to Mark's a man called to Murf. He spoke in a clipped accent, and rolled his r's. Mark decided he was a Scot, known here as a Mac.

"Have you thought of anything?" he inquired.

"No, Oateater, but I will," said Murf.

"And what 'll ye use to do it with?" retorted the Scotchman. Then he laughed heartily. "That last one you tried will go down in history. You might not have been sick when you pretended to be, but you surely were afterward. What with the flogging, and all." He laughed again, and Mark wondered vaguely if there was something the matter with his sense of humor too. But Murf wasn't laughing either.

"It would have worked," maintained Murf, "if the man had been carrying the keys."

"You were too busy having a convulsion to look."

"All right. All right. Have a good laugh. But when I do get a good scheme, don't expect me to waste time opening your door."

This quieted the Scot. Mark wasn't sure what was meant by their conversation, and he didn't get time to figure it out. His attention was distracted by an unholy clamor further down in the cell block. Men were rattling the cell doors and shouting for food.

PRESENTLY the massive door from the courtyard swung open, admitting three men and a flat cart. Two of the men were obviously soldiers. They were armed with swords and daggers, and wore breastplates of lacquered armor. These were two of the four guardsmen he had seen briefly the night before. He was to learn later that these prison guards were soldiers in the service of the city constabulary forces. They were of a slightly higher order than the members of the night-watch, a separate branch of the same force. They were better armed and better paid. Besides their soft berths as guardsmen, they were occasionally called out for duty in quelling civil disorders beyond the capacity of the night-watch.

The soldiers took positions at each side of the door while the third man pushed the cart to the center of the corridor, and distributed the wooden plates.

Mark received his ration and looked at it distastefully. Even if he had wanted food, he certainly wouldn't have wanted that mess.

"Murf," he called, his voice competing with a medley of eating sounds.

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"Umph?" answered the red-head, chewing mightily.

"It just occurred to me that I'm guilty of the crime of breaking curfew, even though I never heard of it. What's the penalty?"

"Drawin' and quarterin'," replied Murf, swallowing a prodigious chunk of meat.

Drawing and quartering.

Mark nodded. Then he realized that he didn't know what drawing and quartering was. He asked Murf. Murf tossed back his hair.

"Listen! I told you that curfew breakers were either thieves or murderers. Therefore they're treated as such. Drawn and quartered!"

"I heard you," Mark said. "But what is it?"

"Say, where did you come from? That's standard punishment all over."

"Oh," said Mark. "Is it?"

"You're a funny one," declared Murf, looking at him sharply. "But if you want to know—they nail you to a wall with spikes through your hands and feet. Then they stick a knife in your belly, reach in and grab one end of the mess that's in there, and draw it out slowly. That's the drawing part. It lasts for a while and you don't die right away if the fellow knows his job.

"You understand that? Well—

"Then they cut you in four. That's the quartering part. I'm against it, myself. And there's only a slight chance of getting any other sentence. Sometimes the magistrate gets a notion to vary the monotony by having a man burned at the stake, or hung, but it's usually drawin' and quarterin'."

"Sounds messy," was all Mark said.

The redhead went back to his meal with a relish. He finished, wiped his mouth on a sleeve, and skimmed the wooden plate in the direction of the big door. Mark had been inspecting the rusted bars of his cell door, but looked up at the sound of the clattering plate.

"Are you still hungry?"

"I'm always hungry," replied Murf.

MARK nodded and grasped two adjoining bars of the door. No strain showed in his face, but the sinews of his arms stood out like steel cables and the muscles of his shoulders knotted and threatened to push through his bronzed skin. Slowly the two bars bent. As they did so, the lower ends lifted out of the holes in the bottom of the door.

No other man could have maintained that terrific pressure even if he could have exerted it. But the radioactive element which supplied Mark's energy was constant, and built up broken-down cell tissue in an instant.

Eventually the bars bent so far that they were clear, and Mark jerked them asunder with a savage wrench.

Then he bent over, picked up his plateful of garbage and calmly stepped through the opening. He handed the dish to a pop-eyed Murf. Murf took it, numbly.

"Look," he finally whispered, "I'm not so hungry now. Do you suppose you could do that to my door?"

Mark nodded. "I don't see why not." It didn't take so long this time, for he had noticed how the bars lifted through the holes. He took his grip further down, and the job was accomplished in half the time. Murf stepped through, the plate of food still in his hands.

A sort of subdued bedlam arose when the other prisoners saw what had happened. Each prisoner whispered his demand to be released, too. Mark had no intention of taking time to operate on any more cell doors. He was searching for an exit.

Abruptly the clamor ceased. Mark had found the window, but he turned to see what had happened. He saw Murf with his hands raised for quiet.

"It's broad daylight," he told them. "And if the whole gang breaks out, they'll nail us right away. But the two of us can make it. There won't be any trials until after the holidays, so you're safe for a while. If you'll swear allegiance to my cause, we'll come back on the first moonless night and turn you loose. What say?"

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Another hushed murmur, not quite as loud as the last, and Murf darted down the corridor to join Mark. He looked up at the window, about nine feet off the floor. It also was barred. As if the two men had rehearsed the thing for months, they went into action.

Mark leaped for the bars, grasped them, and Murf moved against the wall, placing his shoulders under Mark's bare feet. Standing thus, Mark was able to exert pressure. It took a little longer, for the bars were fastened deeply into the stone of the jail wall.

It was a matter of several minutes before the two fugitives found themselves safely in an alleyway back of the jail. Murf was panting with excitement and exertion, and seemed anxious to get away from the immediate vicinity as quickly as possible. Impatiently he tugged at Mark's arm, muttering urgently as he regained his breath.

"Calm yourself, friend," admonished Mark. "They don't even know we've escaped, as yet. But if we attract attention by hurrying too much . . ."

"You're a cool one," Murf said. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I don't really know," Mark admitted. "I've got to find out. That's why I couldn't stay in there any longer."

"Oh, sure. You wasn't worried about being kilt at all."

MURF glanced at the winged helmet, which Mark still retained, and an expression of sly cunning crossed his face for the briefest instant.

Mark missed the look, for they had reached the end of the alley and he was inspecting the street before them. There were several pedestrians about, and one ox-cart was progressing slowly in their direction. Mark noticed that there seemed to be no uniformity of dress among those on the street.

There were a few women, apparently of the poorer class, and in the next block he could see two men who were probably soldiers. Across the street was a party of four men, partially intoxicated, whom he took to be sailors returning to their ship after a night of carousing. Except for the fact that all those in sight had more clothing on than he, it was probable that he could pass unnoticed on the city streets.

"Don't worry about it," said Murf, at his question. "This is a shipping town, and they're used to seeing all kinds of people. Even Vikes like you."

"Vikes?"

"You don't even know that, do you? You're a Vike. I can tell by the tin hat. But it's all right. The Brish and the Vikes are at peace right now. Just the same we had better get you some different clothes, because they'll be looking for a Vike when they find we escaped."

"But they didn't know that when I was captured. They asked me if I was Mic or Mac."

"The night-watch is stupid," Murf explained. "But when they tell the prison captain what you looked like, he'll know. So we'd better get rid of that hat."

Regretfully Mark tossed the winged helmet back into the alley, and they proceeded at a leisurely pace down the street—away from the prison.

"Where shall we go?" inquired Mark.

"Leave everything to me," advised Murf. "I've got friends in this city. They'll take care of us." Murf spoke in a tone that any twentieth century ward-heeler would have recognized at once.

Mark decided he might as well go along. He would meet new people, and that would help him remember. Even now his mind was coping with a vagrant memory. It had to do with Murf's assertion that he was a Vike. Earlier in the day, he had told the night-watch that he was a Yank, and though he didn't know why he had said it, it had seemed to be right at the time. But now the word Vike seemed to strike a responsive chord. It wasn't quite right—his memory insisted that the word was "Viking," and it had an air of familiarity.

Suddenly bedlam swooped down upon them.

Around a corner swung an ornate car-

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riage drawn by sleek horses, and flanked on either side by a mounted soldier. Without warning, the horses suddenly reared, kicked at the traces, and dashed madly down the street!

THE mounted soldiers, taken by surprise, were slow to act, and the carriage had a good start before they thundered in pursuit. Their mounts were swift and they were gradually overtaking the runaways, when an excited shout arose from the people lining the street. Directly ahead of the careening carriage was the ox-cart, effectively blocking the way. The soldiers could never close up the gap in time to prevent the crash.

Mark caught a fleeting vision, through the window of the carriage, of a terror-stricken girl with an infant clasped to her breast. Abruptly he went into action.

The nearer horse was opposite him when he made a prodigious leap and landed astride its back. The frightened horse almost went to its knees. Mark made a frantic snatch for the reins of the farther horse as it slewed about, threatening to dash them all against a building. His lightning grasp was sure and in another instant he had brought the heads of both horses back. They came to a stop with several feet of safety short of the impending crash.

Before Mark could realize that he was really quite a remarkable fellow, an excited crowd had rushed him and raised him aloft, shouting and parading around the carriage.

Bewildered, Mark began to notice things. This joyous throng seemed to think that he had done an heroic thing. That might mean that the woman in the carriage was a person of great eminence, and beloved to those who were honoring him.

He noticed on the second time around the carriage that the door was opening and a man, resplendent in a handsome uniform, was getting out. The crowd abruptly stopped and placed him on his feet before the uniformed man, then respectfully stepped back.

The man held out his hand. Erect, still pale from his experience, he gave an impression of intelligence and culture above that of the others around him. There was a kindliness about his eyes that was at once engaging and yet seemed to hide a certain ever-present sadness.

"Your name, my friend?" he asked.

"Mark." He hesitated. "Should I know yours?"

Surprise appeared on the man's face before he could control it. "Perhaps you should," he replied, smiling. "I am Jon, Duke of Scarbor. And I wish to extend my sincere thanks, on behalf of Her Highness and myself, for your heroic act."

Mark nodded, embarrassed and not certain if the customs of this land required him to speak or act in any specified manner toward a man who was obviously one of the ruling class. He liked this man, Jon, and didn't wish to offend him.

"As a token of gratitude, it is my desire to reward you in a way that would be most pleasing to you. Suppose you name the reward. Anything within my power."

There was only one thing he desired, Mark was ruefully thinking, and no man could grant that—the return of his memory.

"There is nothing," he said. "Anyone with the opportunity would have acted as—"

Murf, suddenly pushing his way through the crowd, interrupted him. "Your Highness," he panted, dodging the hands of those who would have stopped him, "there *is* a reward that would please this man!"

CHAPTER IV

KING TO BE

THE Duke waved aside the soldiers who pounced on the red-head before he came within six feet of the carriage. "Speak," he commanded. "What is this reward?"

Murf leered at the soldiers. "A pardon!" he answered, and grinned at the wondering glances of the crowd. "This man comes from a far country. Without knowing of

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the curfew laws he entered the city too early in the morning. The night-watch clapped him in prison about an hour before the gong. And Your Highness knows the penalty for curfew-breaking."

The Duke shuddered. "Quite. But if he was placed in prison, how is it that he is now free?"

"Upon being informed of the penalty he must suffer for his innocent trespass, he escaped. But he will be tracked down without Your Highness' pardon."

The Duke smiled. "I am in your debt for this information," he said. "You have shown me how I may avert a wrong. But how is it that you know all this?"

Murf glanced nervously about as if wondering whether to make a run for it, then squared his thin shoulders. "I also was unjustly imprisoned," he said, trying to look as virtuous as possible. "When I told this man how I was borne false witness against, he took pity and freed me also."

The Duke's eyes twinkled. "A Mic, eh?" he chuckled. "Always unjustly accused, always downtrodden; but never without a likely sounding story. However, I am in your debt. There will be two pardons and quickly."

A cheer went up from the crowd as the Duke reentered the carriage. But the smile of approval from his pretty wife probably weighed far heavier in his scale of values. Neither could guess that as a ruler, he was inviting disaster.

Mark and Murf were both lifted to the shoulders of enthusiastic men and carried behind the carriage back to the prison. This time they entered the office of the captain, which was much better than being forced through the courtyard to the cell-block.

A short time later Mark hurried toward the alley from which they had earlier emerged to the street. Murf scurried after, quite puzzled. He wasn't kept in suspense long. With a dive Mark swooped into the alley and came out a moment later, smiling happily. He brushed some mud from the gleaming surface of the helmet he had retrieved, and placed it jauntily on his head. Then he patted the axe which had been returned to him. Murf shook his head, mystified.

"It looks like losing them gimcracks is the only thing about the whole business that really had you worried," he remarked.

MARK nodded. He didn't explain that the axe and the helmet were the only concrete links between him and the past. Nor that it was his hope that the sight and feel of them would stir his memory. And it is just as well that he didn't, for then Murf might have seen that he lost them again. For canny Murf was cooking up a plan, whose ultimate success depended on Mark's innocence and gullibility.

"Why did you lie?" Mark inquired. "You didn't tell me you were falsely accused. And I'll bet you weren't."

Murf laughed. "No. Sure, it just sounded better that way. His nibs didn't believe me anyway. But I couldn't tell him that I was guilty of treason. He wouldn't have pardoned me for that."

Mark thought for a minute. "Then you took a chance of being sent back to prison when you spoke up for me."

Murf waved a hand airily. "Sure. Sure. It was a gamble, but it turned out all right. And I paid back a debt. You got me out, and I got you a pardon."

"Still, you took a dangerous chance. Treason is a grave offense. Now I'm in your debt." Through Mark's gratitude ran a tiny dark thread of suspicion. Beware the Irish bearing gifts.

Murf glanced away to hide triumph in his face.

"Forget it," he said. "Come on with me."

Mark saw no reason why he shouldn't.

The way led through a squalid section of the town, and little attention was paid to Mark's singular dress—or lack of it. There were sailors from far lands, fish-peddlers with their carts, laborers, an occasional lady of the street, and innumerable strutting soldiers.

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Once an armorer in the doorway of his shop stopped Mark and asked for a look at his axe. Mark handed it to him and wondered at the man's excitement.

"The ancient metal!" gasped the armorer. "Where did you get it?"

Mark shook his head, uncertainly. "I've always had it," he answered.

"But it's made of the ancient metal, which does not rust! It is found nowhere but in the ruins of the cities of our ancestors. Modern steel-men cannot duplicate it. How much will you sell it for?"

Mark hesitated, and Murf decided to take a hand. "What will you pay?"

"A thousand coppers!"

Murf turned to Mark. "It's a good price," he said. "You can get an ordinary axe for ten. You'll need money. You haven't any, have you?" He looked hopefully toward Mark's single pocketless garment.

Money . . . medium of exchange . . . with which one could buy the necessities of life. No! he decided, abruptly. "I need the axe, but I don't need money. Sorry, no sale."

Murf shook his head and they went on their way. Mark was becoming acutely aware of the fact that somehow or other he required no "necessities of life."

THEIR destination was a haberdashery shop. The proprietor, a wizened man with shrewd eyes, was both surprised and upset at sight of Murf. He came round the counter, closed the door and pulled curtains across the windows.

"Murf!" he exclaimed, in tones he might have used upon being told that an epidemic had struck the town. "You mustn't come here! They're sure to find you. It will jeopardize the cause!"

Murf laughed. "Hush your blather, man. Is your leader as stupid as you? I have been pardoned. This is Mark, who will some day be our king!" This last announcement came as a distinct surprise to Mark, who had some remembering notion of the word's meaning.

Murf went on rapidly, while Mark listened with incredulous ears. Murf's story proved him to be an accomplished liar and an adept at the perhaps forgotten art of the buildup. The haberdasher, who was named Smid, listened with avid interest, now and then glancing admiringly at Mark.

"He is a fit leader," Murf concluded, pompously. "One who will administer justice, not persecution."

Smid nodded. "And one who will inspire the cooperation we need from our loosely-joined allies. The other groups have never fully trusted you, you know." His eyes twinkled maliciously.

Murf nodded. "My cursed red hair," he said. "They've always thought I was with the Mics. Just because my grandfather came from Eire. The dolts! But they'll trust this Vike, for the Vikes are not intriguers. If they wanted anything from the Brish they'd descend in their ships and take it."

Smid nodded and seemed perfectly willing to accept Mark at face value. Mark, who found his attitude unbelievably naïve, followed Murf into the living quarters in the rear.

"Look," he said. "Would you mind explaining all this? I don't know what this is all about, and I'm pretty sure I don't want any part of it. It seems to me you might have the decency to consult me about it before you go around slamming crowns on my head."

Murf looked at him incredulously, and then changed his expression to a sympathetic smile. "I had forgotten," he said. "You don't know that I'm giving you a chance to help the downtrodden and oppressed. Man, you have not the right to refuse at all. 'Tis your sacred duty. Listen to me."

AND Murf explained. From his deft and Celtic tongue rolled an eloquent depiction of the terrible conditions of the land. Of the unbearable taxation of the poor, and lavish ease and luxury of the nobles. Of the inhuman penal code, torture, corruption, squalor—all dripped

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persuasively from his flow of words until at last the bewildered Mark was more than half convinced, and sure only of not being sure of anything.

Even apart from his obligation to Murf, Mark really felt that this might be a cause to warrant the aid of any red-blooded man. This thought brought him up short. *His* blood was blue.

Not that it changed his ideas, but it reminded him that he must not lose sight of the fact that he was different, and that he had to find out the reason for the difference. He knew that there lay the clues that would lead him to the lovely lady of his half-awakened memories.

"But you said I would some day be king," he said.

"Of course. The various groups who are working for the betterment of this country, are loosely joined because they lack a real leader. You will supply them with one. They will unite under your leadership."

How was Mark to know that Murf was a master of the patter of the soapbox agitator? He sounded sincere enough and clever words are delicate but often irresistible webs to trap and hold fast the innocent.

"But it doesn't make sense," Mark insisted, yielding inch by inch. "I am an outsider, not even familiar with the country."

"Makes no difference," said Murf. "The Brish are a people who require an impressive leader, or they won't move. They must have a king, even though that king has to relegate all the duties of his kingship to more capable men. The Brish need him as a symbol. And your part in the coming events will be to bind our members under your leadership, and let them revere you as their deliverer. And in the meantime, I, as your lieutenant, will plan the moves to be made."

Mark said nothing.

Murf, who had stripped and was busily washing off some of the prison grime, sensed something of Mark's thoughts. "Your position is an honorable one," he pointed out. "It will further a cause which might otherwise lack the impetus to get it started. If I am willing to continue the work without hope of reward, even of recognition, you should be. To you will go all the glory and adulation. But to remove the yoke of oppression from my people, I consider it a small sacrifice. Surely you can have no objection." His tone was convincingly pious.

Mark suddenly felt ashamed of himself. "I'll work with you," he said, simply. "But there is one thing I must insist upon."

"What is that?"

"When this work is done, you must take over yourself. I can't be tied down here. I must be free to take up my life from the point where I lost it. Some day I'll remember, and then I shall leave."

CHAPTER V

MARK THE DELIVERER

THE days that followed were busy ones for Mark. Murf and Smid contacted members of rebellious groups in the Duchy of Scarbor, presented Mark, and proceded to win them over to the idea of a new leader. The idea took hold with unanimous enthusiasm. Stories of Mark's unjust imprisonment, his miraculous escape and the adroit manner in which he had grasped the opportunity to obtain his, and Murf's, pardon, had traveled ahead of them.

The story had lost nothing in the telling, having already been considerably embellished by Murf. He had credited Mark with having planned the whole episode, and with admirable modesty had toned down his own part in it.

Mark allowed this, though inwardly cringing at the deception, for he realized that he was playing a necessary part. Occasionally there would be doubters, who found it impossible to believe that a man's arms could be strong enough to bend stout iron bars. So Mark would patiently show off for them, feeling a little silly. On request, he gave exhibitions of axe-throwing, in much the same fashion as

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twentieth century politicians had gone about kissing babies and submitting to initiation into Indian tribes.

In the course of his campaign Mark ran across many evidences of poverty and oppression, and his anger mounted along with his growing urge to do something about it. Murf and Smid were delighted at the success of his efforts to bring all the rebellious factions under his leadership. His speeches, prepared by Murf, were delivered with fervor and conviction. Mark was no orator and got fussed when a crowd cheered Murf's canny platitudes, but it was all in the day's work.

The Duchy of Scarbor, of the four that comprised the country of the Brish, was the most important nut to crack. It was the largest and most thickly populated, and it harbored some of the more powerful of the ruling nobles. The Duke of Scarbor, he learned with a twinge of sympathy, was a mere figurehead, forced to do the bidding of the other nobles. They controlled the army and owned the greater part of the land. And although Jon, the duke, made efforts to alleviate suffering among the poorer classes, he was invariably overruled. The nobles, interested only in their own welfare, considered it good policy to keep the people properly to heel.

Lunn, the province to the south, was the capital of the country of the Brish. It was presided over by Alred, Emperor of the Brish, who was the father of Jon of Scarbor. He too, was popular with the people, but helpless to do anything for them. His hands were as thoroughly tied by the Council of Peers, as were his son's by the ruling nobles of Scarbor. This Council, it appeared, were representatives of the various nobles of the four Duchies, empowered to act in their behalf.

But though his success in organization was such that the rebellious factions of the Duchy of Scarbor were solidly united in a matter of days, Mark was troubled by a sense of futility. Time's passage had not produced the desired effect on his memory. The associations which should have reminded him of incidents in his past were failing of their purpose. Could it be that he was living a life so foreign to his former one that there were no parallels, no similar occurrences that he might match up and start a train of recollection?

THERE was only one thing to console him in his constant quest for knowledge of his past. During the long nights when his companions rested and slept, he was able to think more clearly. Each night he was in a different place, as they campaigned about the country, but his surroundings meant little to him. For no matter where he was, he could always conjure up the vision of Nona, the woman he knew was his.

And lately he was able to associate her with the presence of another person. Who this person was he couldn't quite grasp, but the feeling was there that it was someone who had played an important part in his former life. And Nona was clearer, too. Sometimes he could hear the low throbbing of her laugh, and it never failed to leave him with a sensation of happiness and desire.

The Duchy of Scarbor had been thoroughly canvassed and thoroughly organized by the end of the second week of the harvest holidays. The final week of the holiday period was to be devoted to games in the great arena. These games were a gesture of the nobles calculated to take the minds of their subjects off their troubles.

Murf and Smid decided that inasmuch as the following days would bring a return to normalcy, it was high time to strike their blow.

First all prisoners must be released from the jails. Most of these would immediately join the cause and swell their ranks. It was decided that the first jail delivery would be made from the prison from which he and Mark had escaped.

Murf laid his plans with admirable thoroughness. Instead of going about the business furtively, he dressed several men in uniforms corresponding to those of the

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night-watch. Mark was attired in a sergeant's outfit, except that he insisted on keeping his axe.

Boldly they marched through the streets long after curfew, headed for the jail. The night was cloudy and the moon obscured. This fitted their plans, for after the jail-break it would be necessary for the prisoners to scatter and find concealment with friends, and every minute on the streets there would be danger of being sighted by genuine patrolmen.

The plan went off like clockwork—up to a certain point.

Reaching the prison, the party entered the courtyard and stopped before the huge oaken door. Mark hammered on it with the butt of his axe. The door was supposedly impregnable to anything less devastating than a battering ram, and could only be opened from inside the guardroom. The inner door was equally formidable from the side of the cell block. It also could be opened from the guardroom only.

But evidently the authorities had never considered that a weakness was present in the fact that the guards were in the habit of opening the outer door whenever the night-watch brought in a prisoner. The open-sesame was the hammering of the night-watch sergeant's club.

After a moment the door swung outward. Before the startled guard knew what was happening, he was felled by an enthusiastic club. His three companions were downed before they could move.

A ring of keys hung on a nail beside the inner door. In a matter of moments Mark had swung open the inner door and released the prisoners. A search of the prison revealed several other blocks of cells, one to match each key on the ring. The locks on the doors of each row of cells were opened by a single key. Over two hundred prisoners were released in the course of less than a half hour.

THE thing had been accomplished with the utmost quiet. Mark was congratulating himself on their efficiency when he received a rude jolt. In the guardroom were only three unconscious men!

Hastily he gave orders to leave. He didn't know how much time had elapsed since the missing man had regained consciousness. He may have already summoned help. Why hadn't he taken time to bind them or at least have left a guard over them?

But there was no time now for regrets. He swung the outer door open, and realized at once that the damage had been done. The sound of a large number of running men echoed down the street!

They were nearing the archway that led into the courtyard. In the few seconds that remained, Mark put into effect the only plan that had a chance of success. He deployed his men in the shadows at the sides of the archways. The door to the guardroom gaped open, illuminated by a glow from the oil-lamp within.

It was Mark's hope that the approaching men would head immediately for the door, and that they would fail to see his men in the darkness outside.

The sound of slapping sandals was growing louder, and Mark's heart sank as he heard the occasional clank of armor. Sword-hilts striking against breastplates! These were soldiers coming, not poorly armed watchmen. His eyes, accustomed to the darkness, could see the grim expressions on the faces of his men, indicating that they had interpreted the sounds as he had.

But the way they held their clubs and knives told him, that even though outnumbered and outclassed in armament, they would give a good accounting of themselves if it came to a fight.

The foremost of the soldiers dashed through the archway and continued, without breaking his stride, toward the lighted door. His eyes, partially blinded by the dim light, missed the men crouched in the shadows. Those who followed dashed right after him.

A steady stream, numbering at least fifty armored soldiers, crossed the courtyard at a run. Mark was elated at the suc-

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cess of his strategy. He was calling for his men to break cover and make their escape when abruptly a laggard soldier puffed through the archway. He was a heavy man, and had little breath left when he confronted Mark's party. But what small amount of wind he retained, he used in a hoarse yell as he drew his sword and swung it at Mark.

Mark stepped out of range of the swing and then felled the man with an axe blow as his momentum carried him past. But the yell had done its work. The last two of the soldiers to dash into the prison had heard it and were calling to those who had gone before.

One man went down without striking a blow, but the other three were cutting at him viciously. His own men were not slow in sizing up the situation, however. In a body they dashed forward and belabored the three with heavy clubs. The soldiers were driven back through the portal. It slammed shut with a thud.

MARK realized that he was holding a lion by the tail. He leaned against the door and kept it closed against the pressure of the soldiers on the other side. But there was no way to secure it. The bolts were on the other side of the door. In a few minutes, as the men on the inside found that the prison was empty, they would all be pushing.

"Back to headquarters! he ordered. "Walk! Don't attract any attention. I'll hold the door until you get a good start."

"But what of you? They'll get you!"

"Do as I say! If we all make a break for it, they'll trace us back to headquarters. Go quietly and no one will notice you. I'll meet you there."

Reluctantly, the spurious night-watch obeyed. His way was the only solution.

Mark, his back braced against the door, counted the beats of his pulse.

He had to give his party a start sufficient to carry them far enough away that they could not be reached if the soldiers should spread out in a search for them.

At the count of five-hundred, indicating that about seven minutes had passed, he suddenly released his pressure from the door, and sped across the courtyard. The door swung violently open and five men went to their knees. Those in the rear scrambled past them and took up the chase.

But by the time they reached the archway, Mark was a dwindling figure in the distance. At their best speed the soldiers followed. It was a hopeless chase, for in the space of a few blocks the murkiness of the night had swallowed up their quarry, leaving no evidence of his passing.

They scattered, trying to pick up the trail, but finally had to give it up. The search ended at a spot several miles removed from the location of the rebel headquarters, for Mark had purposely led them in the opposite direction. But the real chase was only beginning. . . .

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. ADV.

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MEN of DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
THE LARGEST PEARL
WHILE EXCAVATING IN THE PHILLPPINES, IN 1934, WILBURN COBB, ARCHAEOLOGIST AND EXPLORER, HEARD RUMORS OF A FABULOUS PEARL. HEAD-HUNTING DYAKS NEAR BORNEO HAD DISCOVERED ONE OF THEIR DIVERS, DROWNED, IN THE GRIP OF A GIANT CLAM!
BROUGHT TO THE SURFACE, THE GREAT 14-POUND, 9-INCH PEARL, ESTIMATED TO BE 300 YEARS OLD, WAS FOUND. (THE WORLD'S LARGEST, HITHERTO, WAS THE BERESFORD HOPE, WEIGHING A FIFTH OF A POUND AND VALUED AT $45,000.)
BRAVING UNEXPLORED JUNGLES, COBB LOCATED THE TRIBE. AFTER SHOOTING A HUGE CROCODILE THAT HAD KILLED THE HEADMAN'S SON, HE WAS SHOWN THE PEARL WHICH THE DYAKS VENERATED DUE TO A RESEMBLANCE TO THE HEAD OF MOHAMMED.
THEY REFUSED TO SELL IT. RETURNING IN TWO YEARS, COBB FOUND THE HEADMAN'S ELDEST SON DYING OF MALARIA. HE TOOK HIS LIFE IN HIS HANDS TO ADMINISTER DRUGS. THE BOY RECOVERED.
OFFERED A REWARD, COBB ASKED TO BUY THE PEARL. THE HEADMAN REFUSED, BUT GAVE IT TO HIM, ON CONDITION HE RETURN IN A YEAR TO ALLOW THEM TO PURIFY "THE HEAD OF THE PROPHET" BEFORE TURNING IT OVER TO AN UNBELIEVER. COBB WAS THERE... ... AND IS NOW OWNER OF THE LARGEST PEARL IN THE WORLD!

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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When the River Ran White

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Author of "The Snow Patrol," "The Avenging Shepherd," etc.

The wolves cried to the gray sky; and the thunder of swift water did not drown the guns. This was a time for a Redcoat to walk carefully, in company with peril . . .

Complete Short Novel

CHAPTER I

ROARING SWIFTWATER

UP IN the high places, the snow was going off in a hurry this spring; a thousand unnamed creeks and rivulets pouring their icy flood into the brooding, spruce-choked Swiftwater. Although the crest of the run-off was still several weeks away, Dead Man's Run, a mean, treacherous stretch of water, whatever the season of the year, was already a swirling, racing torrent, the water boiling white over its submerged reefs of knife-edged rocks as Sergeant Jim Larned and Constable Moran drove the big police canoe up its long reach.

With deceivingly effortless strokes they finally broke through it, and the river opened wide before them. Larned looked back over the way they had come and said nothing. Never a man to waste words, he had been singularly silent on this patrol. Finally, Constable Moran swung around on the bow thwarts and faced him.

"Jim, you're glummer than an owl," he observed soberly. "I know you're thinking plenty. It helps sometimes to get a thing off your chest." And after a pause: "Clavelly's got this little jaunt down on the books as just a routine spring patrol to Two Loon Lake and the head of the Swiftwater."

Moran expressed his contempt for Inspector Clavelly with an explosive clacking of his tongue. "Routine, my foot! But that's Clavelly for you! Figure out the wrong thing to do and you can depend on him to do it every time!"

From the stern of the canoe Larned shot him a speculative and grimly amused glance. A Northern man himself, he was bitterly aware of Inspector Clavelly's short-comings. They affected him in a matter so personal in this instance that he had no desire to discuss it even with Moran, though he had no better friend on the Force than red-headed Dinny.

Hoping to turn the conversation away from himself, he said, with a lightness he was far from feeling: "I seem to recall something in the Regulations covering your remarks, me lad. Something concerning the proper respect to be shown your superior officers. Another peep out of you and you'll be on your way to Edmonton less insignia on your uniform."

"Yeah?" Moran grunted, not fooled for a second. In the three years that had passed since he had come North, the rawest of rookies, Larned and he had made history for the Mounted. The manner in which they had recently put down the Cree uprising at Artillery Inlet was enough in itself to guarantee eventual advancement for both.

"You can throw the whole book on me, if you want to, but it won't stop me from saying what's on my mind," Moran said. "If Clavelly had any regard for your feelings, he wouldn't have marked you up for this patrol. He knows Rick McNair was released from the Stoney Mountain pen last week; that he's been reported seen this side of the Thorofare Divide."

"Don't worry about it," Larned said

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Larned stepped out swiftly, and the blacklegs dropped their guns

quietly. "I'm right where I want to be. When you've got a situation to face there's no point in putting it off."

Constable Moran dropped his paddle, his blue eyes snapping with a fine mixture of surprise and chagrin.

"Then you're expecting to find him waiting for you when you walk into Duncan MacNair's traderoom! Why not say so?"

A faint trace of a smile touched Larned's lean, bronzed face. "Maybe it would be better to say that I'm prepared to meet him. I'm not too sure he'll be there. After all, old Duncan is a dour man—even where his own son is concerned. He's had nothing but trouble from Rick in three years."

Moran grunted skeptically. "Don't bother to tell me what the old man said at the trial. That 'never darken my door' stuff is all right in books, but you can't throw off a worthless, no-good skunk that easy. Rick MacNair's heading for home!" He turned back to his paddling. "He knows he's got Laurie to plead his case. She's never completely lost faith in her blackleg brother," he added over his shoulder.

Larned nodded to himself and said nothing. He knew how true Dinny's words were. Rick was only Laurie MacNair's half-brother, but she had stood up for him staunchly, insisting that he was just a wild, reckless youngster who would be all right when he found himself.

Larned knew better; suspicions and evidence had been piling up against Rick for a long time. Such things as the looting of fur caches on the Porcupine and Edna Creek, the slugging and robbing of a trapper at Berdan's Crossing. There never had been evidence enough to get a conviction.

Rick's luck had run out on him, however, when he and three others attempted to hijack an H.B.C. fur train moving south through the Sabille Waterways. His companions, known renegades, had escaped; Rick had been found guilty and sent away for a solid year.

IN THE bow of the canoe Moran was mumbling to himself, his exasperation evident. Larned said, "Listen, fella, if you've got anything to say, speak up. I can take it from you."

"Damn it, you're cool about it!" Moran snapped. "From your attitude, a man

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would think this thing didn't mean anything to you. You know what his coming back is going to do to Laurie and you. She'll never marry you now. She'll put you off because she figures there's a stain on the MacNair name; that she'd be standing in your way on the Force if she married you. I wonder what you think it's going to be like now."

"I don't know," was the slow answer. Larned's tone was bleaker than he knew.

"She'll never admit it—not even to herself—but she's going to be waiting for that ornery pup to step over the traces again," Moran drove on. "And he will, make no mistake about that! Prison doesn't help his kind."

Larned's face had gone hard and flat. Moran was only putting into words the very thoughts with which he had been torturing himself for days. Suddenly his eyes narrowed with the sharp realization that Dinny had a purpose behind what he was saying. "What is it you're driving at?" he demanded brusquely. "There's something on your mind."

"Jim, I sent Rick MacNair away. It may be your turn to do it next time. That's beside the point. What I'm driving at is this: if Rick is there, what is Laurie going to think when she sees us arriving together?

"You'll never be able to make her believe that we aren't hounding him—keeping cases on him before he's had a chance to prove whether he's going to go straight or not. For my end, that's all right; but there's no reason why you should have any part of it. Let me put you ashore. I'll make the rest of this patrol on my own and pick you up about nightfall."

If Larned took a long time over his answer it was not because he was in any doubt as to what it must be. Finally, he said: "I can't play it that way, Dinny. You're a skookum, fella, though."

"Jim, don't be a fool," Moran pleaded. "This will mean plenty to you."

"That's why I've got to go myself," Larned answered soberly. With an adept stroke he set the canoe toward shore.

"What's the idea?" Moran demanded.

"That you were right about one thing; this is going to be a one-man patrol until I get back here this evening. And just so I can look the Regulations in the eye, you'll hoof it back through the timber to Lac Malotte and investigate the rumor that Pete Gendron has been using that Cree woman of his for a human target again."

The canoe touched the shore beneath a spreading tamarack. Moran swung lightly around on the bow thwarts and faced him. "Jim," he said earnestly, "don't be stubborn. Let me take this off your hands."

"Constable, you'll get your duffel ashore and follow it immediately." Larned's tone was crisply official. Moran stared at him for a moment, utterly unabashed.

"I guess you mean it," he grumbled. He tossed his bag on the bank and stepped out of the canoe. "Just one last word, Jim," he said as Larned raised his paddle. "Be sure your belt-gun is free in the holster. You may need it in a hurry. That young lobo's got some friends, of a sort."

Larned dismissed the warning with a wave of his hand, but as he sent the lightened canoe up the river Moran's parting admonition kept returning to him with sinister insistence.

He understood perfectly that in mentioning Rick MacNair's "friends" Moran was referring to Beaver Baily, Swede Torgerson, and Juneau Baker, the three men who had been with him in the attempted robbery of the fur train at Berdan's Crossing. Possibly they had been with him in other forays. For a year, they had lost themselves in the mazes of the Grand Marais, that notorious sanctuary of wanted men.

"Maybe they've been anxiously awaiting Rick's return," he mused darkly. "The boy's got brains; he's clever and cunning."

He knew they were qualities that often made a man a leader of desperate men.

"No," he decided emphatically, "I'm not going to permit myself to believe such

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things. The kid's made some mistakes; but maybe he's learned his lesson. If he has, I'm going to meet him halfway."

Twenty minutes later, rounding a bend, he glimpsed old Duncan MacNair's post down the serrated trough of virgin timber that marched down the ragged hills to the river's edge.

CHAPTER II

WELCOME TO THE WILDERNESS

SEASONED by sunshine and storm, MacNair's trading post bore an indefinable air of age. It was no deception. For more than thirty years old Duncan, white-haired and shrewd of face now, had traded with the wandering bands of Bloods and Crees who made this isolated stretch of the Northern wilderness their home.

Never had he been detected in a shady deal; it was said of him that he leaned backward in his honesty. Over a thousand square miles of swamp and muskeg, from Le Grand Marais to Tichborne Inlet, he bore the name of a stern and God-fearing man.

A rambling log affair, the post stood down the water's edge as though thrust forward by the heavy growth of pine and hemlock. A plank veranda jutted out over the river, supported by rotting piles and bordered by a peeled cedar rail. Along the bank at a little distance from the post stood the tight, raised fur house and a few other outbuildings.

Larned's eye canvassed the place hungrily, hoping for a sight of Laurie; wondering whether Rick was there. Winter and summer he had known this place so well that its every stick and board was familiar to him. Never had he failed to receive a welcome. And yet today, there was something sinister in the look of these weathered old buildings.

Swinging in to the wharf, he climbed out and pulled the canoe out of the water. He straightened then for another searching look at the post. No one had appeared, not even an Indian. The place was as silent as though deserted. The feeling grew on him that Rick must be here. Perhaps even now the boy was watching his every move. Dinny Moran's warning came back strongly to Larned, and he caught himself wondering if the next moment might bring a slug tearing into him.

The feeling stayed with him as he climbed the rickety plank steps to the veranda. Still there was no sign of life from within. Getting himself in hand, he moved to the door and entered.

As he stepped in the traderoom, his eye fell on old Duncan, slouched deep in his battered chair, a look of gloomy dejection on his face. His dog Silver, his inseparable companion, half Mackenzie River husky and half silver gray wolf, a huge brute, lay sprawled at his feet.

Larned's glance swept the traderoom and the doors giving upon the rooms beyond, and then came back to MacNair as the old man made a half-hearted attempt to rouse himself.

"Well, Duncan, for five years I've been coming here, and I've never failed to get a welcome. This is the first time there hasn't been someone coming down to the wharf to greet me. Are you all right?"

"As right as a mon can be, under the circumstances," the trader answered in his gruff voice. Till the present, sixty-odd years had sat lightly on his broad shoulders, and his eyes, in the seamed bronze face, had always been quick and keen. But today the man looked old and beaten; Larned detected an absence in his glance, as if MacNair's thoughts were chained inexorably to some inner world of his own.

BEFORE MacNair could say more, a step sounded from one of the back rooms, and his daughter Laurie entered. Slim and graceful, with level blue eyes, and hair as raven black as old Duncan's had been in youth, she greeted Larned quickly, with forced lightness, shooting a glance at her father as she did so. He got the suppressed excitement she was laboring under; knew she had overheard her father's words.

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She said: "I heard your voices. I thought—"

Whatever it was that she thought, she neglected to add; but it wasn't necessary. In a flash Larned realized the situation here. Rick hadn't come yet, but they were expecting his arrival any minute. That was plain enough.

It rapidly became even plainer as he attempted to make conversation, without getting anywhere. Laurie moved restlessly to her father's desk. It was cluttered and strewn with papers. Larned happened to know that she didn't spend an hour there in a week; yet she pretended to find something to occupy her now.

Even old Duncan got up and fussed with the piles of supplies on his shelves. Larned's lips thinned. This was going beyond mere inattention. In this country even strangers were welcomed with more hospitality than this.

"Laurie," Larned came to the point at once, "you want me to get out of here. Is that it?"

"Not at all," she answered hurriedly. "We are always glad to see you." She was so nervous and over-wrought that with every word she only confirmed how right he was.

Before he could press her farther, a heavy voice broke in on them from the door. They turned as a big man entered, sleek and dark and oily of manner. It was Bat LaFlamme, MacNair's trader, just in from feeding the dogs. Silver touched him with a friendly paw.

"Bo' jou', bo' jou'" Bat nodded affably to Larned. " 'Ow you are, Sergeant? I didn't know you was 'ere."

It was an absurd lie. Larned knew no man came up this river without Big Bat being aware of his coming. He responded curtly. He had never liked the big Frenchman. Once he had gone so far as to believe that LaFlamme had dared to interest himself in Laurie. Nor had the man ever liked him. Usually he showed him a sullenness and a hostility which made his present friendliness all the more remarkable.

"Firs' spring patrol, eh?" he queried casually. "I'm bet you 'ave lots fun bringin' dat police canoe hup Dead Man's Run h'all 'lone. De water, she's high an' fast dis spring."

He attempted to engage Larned in talk of this and that, persisting even when the latter would have let it go. Jim asked himself what lay behind all this garrulity. While Bat went on, as if time meant nothing whatever to him, Larned observed with understanding Laurie's constantly growing restlessness. Obviously she and Bat were at cross purposes; he wanted this talk to end.

Old Duncan had said little throughout, staring gloomily away at nothing. Now he pulled out his battered silver watch and consulted it. Laurie saw the gesture. Larned noted it too. He knew what it meant. It was dinner time, if not later.

"You can eat if you wish, Father," the girl said in a nervous undertone. "Neeta said dinner was ready a few minutes ago—"

Old Duncan turned toward the dining-room. Silver struggled up and slouched after him, the long claws scratching the floor. Laurie made no move to follow, however. Larned watched her expectantly. She turned to him.

"You're going on to Two Loon, Jim?" she asked steadily. And then, in an apologetic tone: "It will take longer than usual today, with the going as hard as it is."

IT only drove home to him the desperateness of her desire to get rid of him. On countless occasions he had appeared here at meal times; never before had Laurie done other than press him to stay.

Before he could answer, Big Bat put in a word, quickly and smoothly. "No need for heem to hurry," he declared. "I go over to Two Loon myself, yesterday. Everyt'ing ees quiet. Tak' it easy, Sergeant. You spend couple hour 'ere, get started up *rivière* early dees afternoon—"

Laurie turned on him so sharply that not even a blind man could have failed

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to read the tension she was under. The words that came then drove swift and hard.

"Sergeant Larned has not asked your advice, Bat."

"I only tell heem what I t'ink he lak' to hear," LaFlamme replied with a stubborn suavity. "Bagosh, plentay tam' he find eet hard to tear heemself away from dis place."

The clash of wills here was bitter, and Larned read to its bitter end, with a pitying shake of his head. For some hidden reason, the Frenchman had decided to take a hand in this game. It only added to the ordeal Laurie was going through.

Finally she put an end to it with crisp decision, saying: "You get your dinner, Bat."

For a moment, defiance flamed in the Frenchman's dark eyes. Then he shrugged. "Dat's right," he smiled, turning away. "She's tam' for eat."

It was the moment Larned had been waiting for. No sooner had he and Laurie been left to themselves before he moved toward her, his lean-jawed face very serious.

"Laurie, look at me," he commanded quietly. "You're not fooling me this way. . . . You're expecting Rick."

Anguish flickered in her eyes for a brief instant. She gave in then without struggle. "Yes," she nodded simply. And then, with gathering resolution: "Jim, must I ask you to go? Can't you see you aren't wanted just now?"

Her tone grew taut. "Of course we're expecting Rick! Why shouldn't he come here? This is his home. He has served his time, squared himself with the law." She marshaled her reasons so concisely that Larned knew in a twinkling she had been over them all before, in argument with her father.

"The Mounted have nothing against Rick now," she said tensely. "He has paid his debt. Yet here you are, hounding him —checking up on him—even before he has had a chance to show that he means to go straight! . . . Oh, you needn't explain, Jim," she hurried on, when he would have interrupted. "You're the policeman now. You've got Rick down for a bad lot, and nothing will persuade you he is anything but what you think!"

"You're wrong, Laurie," he broke out earnestly. "I have no grudge against Rick. As for this patrol, it's only routine—nothing else. You ought to know that."

"And I suppose I ought to know that once a boy has made a mistake the police will not let him forget it," she rushed on excitedly. "The least the Mounted could do would be to stay away from him entirely and give him a chance to prove himself."

Larned would have said that he was more than ready to agree with her. But her tone did something to him, aroused him to defend the commonsense attitude he knew to be right.

"Rick will have chance enough to prove himself," he said flatly. "Lord knows I hope he fully justifies your faith in him, Laurie. But he'll have to stay out of the Grand Marais!"

Unconsciously his voice had risen at the end. Even as he finished, the door swung open. He whirled toward it. A man stood in the opening. It was Rick MacNair, tall, rawboned, a bitter look stamped on his pale, hard young face.

"Rick!" Laurie cried.

CHAPTER III

THE EAGLE'S SON

RICK MACNAIR had no eyes for her. As she started forward impulsively, he put her aside with a movement of his arm and confronted Larned.

"Giving me orders already, eh?" he said harshly.

"Not orders," Larned answered coldly. "What you overheard was the best advice you'll ever get. I hope you'll take it."

"Keep your advice! You and your Redcoat gang ain't telling me where to head in!"

Laurie fell back, shocked by the venom

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of his words. This was hardly the reformed Rick she had expected. The months he had been away had coarsened his face, put a wild, wolfish look in his eyes.

"Rick, get hold of yourself!" she implored. "This is no way to begin—"

"You keep out of this!" he said fiercely. "But for you, I wouldn't be here. I didn't want to come home. You said everything would be all right. Right?" burst from him contemptuously. "I open the door and walk into a cop! Do you think anything can be all right for me that way, after what I've been through? Rotting away in the pen for a year! . . . God!"

With every moment his rage carried him father away from sanity.

"Laurie—I'm no fool!" he cried. "I know how things are with you two. Where Jim Larned's concerned, I'm a bad second. All I've got to do is look at you to see what's in your mind. I'm in your way. I'm the blacksheep—the family disgrace! So you're going to reform me!"

"Rick, you don't know what you're saying," Laurie protested, her lips bloodless. Larned stepped in between them.

"Rick, you've said enough." There was a chilling quality in his even tone. "Laurie is the best friend you've got. No one—not even you—can talk that way to her when I'm around. You change your tune or I'll mop up the floor with you."

"I'll make you eat that!" the boy blazed. His hand had darted into his shirt. Laurie screamed as it came out with a gun.

"D-r-rop that gun, you worthless scut!" came a thundering command from the direction of the dining-room door. Old Duncan rushed in, a leveled shotgun in his hands. LaFlamme was only a step behind.

THE only sound in the ensuing silence was Laurie's step as she drew back, horror in her white face. Rick stared at his father, arrested and somehow helpless. A moment's pause, and the revolver dropped to the floor. Whatever he thought or felt, young MacNair had looked into his father's fiery eyes too often not to read aright what he found there now.

"So this is the way ye come back! This finishes it. Ye are nae true son of mine. I've said as much before; but the lass plead wi' me, begged me not to be hard on ye. But there's nae bein' kind to such as you." His voice was so bitter that Rick's gaze fell. "Hereafter, I want none o' ye. Pick up yere belongin's and go!"

"Father!" Laurie's hands came out toward the old man. "What are you saying? You can't send him away now! Whatever he is, he's ours. We've got to help him."

The old man shook his head, and there was a wintry look in his eyes. "Lassie, there's no helpin' him. He started wrong and he'll end wrong. I see that now."

"Wan minute, Mac, before you send de boy away," Big Bat put in quickly. "Dere's somet'ing to be said for Rick's side of dis. He's had not'ing but police for year. *Mais* first t'ing he come on dis place, he walk right into policeman. She's all right for Mounted to come 'ere on patrol; but if dey don't have no business 'ere, w'y dey hang roun'?"

Support from LaFlamme was the last thing Laurie expected. Larned read the play of emotion in her face and was prepared for what she said before it reached her tongue.

"Jim, Bat is right. This is a difficult moment for all of us. Will you please go?"

Rick stood there waiting for his answer, but Larned's eyes continued to study LaFlamme. The big Frenchman's game was suddenly no mystery to him. Bat had asked him to stay. Now he condemned him for doing so.

There was only one answer to it: for reasons of his own, LaFlamme was trying to use Rick's return as a means of driving a wedge between Laurie and Jim Larned. But to what purpose? Did it spring from his interest in Laurie? Was there a connection between him and Rick MacNair? Larned's pulse jumped as the thought burned into him. That was it! He knew he couldn't be mistaken.

In a tone that was grimmer than he realized, he gave Laurie her answer. "I'll

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go—" he said. And to himself, he added: "But I'll sure keep my eye on you, La-Flamme!"

CHAPTER IV

WOLVES OF THE GRAND MARAIS

AS THE wild geese fly it was an even forty miles from Duncan MacNair's post to the mouth of the Swiftwater and the broad Vermillion. In this country the Vermillion was the chief artery of trade and travel. Annually a fortune in fine peltries and dust from the gold creeks that formed its headwaters went down its long reaches to Kitchewan and the railroad. It followed that it was well policed.

That had been true even in the old days when the R.C.M.P. post at Kitchewan was only a four-man detachment. Shortly after Clavelly had been named officer commanding, the personnel had been built up to ten men. The inspector had immediately made the Vermillion his chief concern, doubling the number of patrols, often at the expense of the back country, and making them an everlasting headache to the command.

Even Larned did not escape these extra tours of duty. In his case, however, a motor-driven canoe took some of the sting out of the long patrols. Accordingly, early one morning some ten days after his encounter with Rick MacNair, he found himself bound up the Vermillion. Constable Moran was sprawled out comfortably in the bow of the canoe.

Larned knew that Rick had been seen briefly in Kitchewan. The boy's present whereabouts was unknown to him. He tried to tell himself that it did not concern him, but passing the mouth of the Swiftwater, old questions began to stab at him, and always they led him to Laurie. Thought of her, and the unhappiness that he knew she faced, hardened his mouth.

"I'd give an arm to save her from it," he told himself, "but there's nothing I can do until Rick makes a move."

Moran had roused himself. He glanced at Larned. What he saw mirrored in Jim's face checked the words that trembled on his ready tongue, and it was with a distinct feeling of relief that he was able to raise his hand and point out signs of activity on Long John Carmody's landing, just north of the confluence of the rivers. Carmody's post had been the first to be established on the Vermillion, and it still was one of the most prosperous.

"Long John's getting ready to ship his peltries," he observed. "His Nitchies have got 'em piled up on the wharf."

Larned nodded, his interest remote. "He must be expecting the old *Aurora* to be right on the dot this morning."

Carmody himself appeared on the landing a moment later, waving a hairy arm at the police canoe. His hearty call came floating over the water then. Larned answered it, but he did not swing in. With the Vermillion in flood, the current was strong as a mill race as it swept past the landing; less than a foot of Carmody's wharf pilings showing above the surging brown flood of the river.

Half a mile above Carmody's, a sound reached them which brought up Constable Moran's head with a jerk. It was the *Aurora* coming downriver, engines clanking. Her whistle brayed hoarsely a moment later—a shrill, penetrating scream which echoed over the wilderness. The old stern-wheeler was making time.

Captain Angus Murray leaned out of the wheelhouse window to wave a friendly hand as he passed the canoe. Larned grinned and waved back. He had known Angus for years. High water or low, the hard-bitten and bearded Scot had never asked any quarter from these Northern rivers—nor from any man, for that matter. Larned had found him a good friend.

THE *Aurora's* passing seemed to leave an even deeper quiet behind, broken only by the subdued drone of the outboard. Larned retired into the privacy of his thoughts, only to be brought back abruptly, ten minutes later, by a long-drawn echoing wail.

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Constable Moran sat up swiftly. Larned killed the motor.

"That's funny," Moran exclaimed. "What's the *Aurora* blowing for?"

"I'm wondering—" Larned murmured.

They had their answer a second later. Once more the scream of the *Aurora's* whistle knifed the silence. It was repeated time after time.

"Sounds as though hell's broke loose!" Moran exclaimed. "The *Aurora's* in trouble—"

"She's reached Carmody's landing by now," Larned said. "Whatever the trouble is, it's there!"

He needed no confirmation to persuade him to swing the canoe downriver and kick the throttle wide open. The light craft fairly flew as the current caught it. In considerably less time than the *Aurora* had taken, they came in sight of Long John's dock.

The post was a hive of activity. As Larned had predicted, the *Aurora* was moored at the wharf. Carmody's half-breeds and the crew and passengers of the boat were running about excitedly. A number had gathered on the wharf itself, Carmody among them.

"What's the trouble here?" Larned shouted as Moran laid hold of the wharf.

"Fur pirates, Jim!" Carmody cried, red of face. "Four of 'em, there was! They swooped down on me a few minutes after you passed. Made a clean sweep of everythin'!"

Larned climbed out on the wharf, leaving Moran to care for the canoe.

"How did they make their getaway?" he demanded.

"That's the queer part of it, Jim!" Carmody exclaimed. "Had horses with 'em, they did. Rode out of the bush, parked the bales on pack animals, and went back the same way they come. The whole business didn't take more'n a couple minutes."

Larned stared. "Horses?" he echoed blankly. Horses were a rarity in this country. The mere presence of the animals here at all was in itself a surprise. It was more than enough to warn Larned of the shrewdness of the renegades. He took Carmody aside. "Did you recognize any of them, John?"

Long John hesitated over his answer. "No, Jim, I didn't. They was all masked. But—"

"Well?" Larned urged crisply.

"I hate to say it, but one of 'em looked a lot like Rick MacNair," the trader responded reluctantly. "Mind you, I'm not swearin' it was him."

Larned understood his attitude. Carmody had known Duncan MacNair for many years; he had no wish to deal the old man this kind of a blow. But a situation like the present one called for straight speaking.

It was characteristic of Jim that he thought first of what this would mean to Laurie. There was a bare chance that Carmody might be mistaken, of course; but Larned held out no such hope to himself as he went on with his questioning.

THERE was little more to learn. The fur thieves had made their surprise appearance, grabbed the baled peltries at the points of their guns, and disappeared as quickly as they had come. Larned examined every item of evidence carefully.

"You say they rode west from here—toward the Grand Marais?" he demanded. Carmody nodded positively.

"Straight over the height of land, Jim," he affirmed. "They was makin' for the Big Mud, all right."

Larned had expected as much. Le Grand Marais, or the Big Mud, as it was contemptuously referred to, was a desolate, treacherous stretch of swamp and muskeg over three hundred miles square, with a hundred creeks flowing through it in every direction. For years it had been a safe hideout for renegades and men whose lives had been forfeited to the law. There were lobsticks in the Mounted's little cemetery in Kitchewan that bore mute testimony to what the Grand Marais had cost the Force.

The fact that the outlaws were using horses made any effort at overhauling them

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before they lost themselves in the Big Mud well night hopeless. By canoe, it would take hours to reach the creeks toward which they were heading.

Larned had no intention of giving up, however. If Rick MacNair was involved in this robbery, he meant to know it sooner or later.

With Captain Murray readily agreeing to make a forced run downriver, Larned dispatched Moran to Kitchewan with a report for Inspector Clavelly. No recommendations accompanied the report, and for an excellent reason. Clavelly would quickly make up his mind as to what was to be done. Jim predicted grimly to himself that the present case would be no exception to the rule.

The *Aurora* pulled away a few minutes later. Larned turned to Carmody. "John, let me have your best tracker. I'm going to trail those renegades, even if it's only to make sure where they went."

Carmody acceded readily. "You'll never catch up with 'em, Jim," he groaned, the amount of his loss beginning to overwhelm him.

At first, the horse sign was plain reading to both Larned and the breed. The fur thieves had struck straight back through the forest. Presently the trail led up over rough, rock-strewn ground, working ever higher over the height of land. With the breed in the lead, they pressed on at a fast walk over ground which Larned, by himself, would have been forced to quarter carefully.

Noon came and passed before Larned sensed the nearness of the Grand Marais. They had come down to low ground once more; on either hand muskeg began to appear. The trail was wet. In places the horses they followed had sunk fetlock deep in the mud.

In the early afternoon they broke through a fringe of spruce to find themselves at the edge of open water, stretching away through the tules in dark, mysterious channels. Jim knew they had reached the Big Mud. It was well named. Every step had become treacherous. There was an air of brooding loneliness over this place that had power to depress even the hardiest.

Larned looked around. It might have been a land of the dead. Nothing moved. No sound but the lonely cry of a loon broke the stillness. The breed grunted without warning, gesturing toward a thick clump of brush. The unexpectedness of the interruption sent a chill down the sergeant's spine.

"Horse stop pretty queek," the Nitchie declared. "Mebby-so in brush."

Wading that way, they came upon the abandoned animals, steaming as they stood with drooping heads. Near at hand, on the edge of a mud bank, the breed pointed out the marks where two canoes had been shoved off.

Larned nodded woodenly. The quarry had flown and was beyond reach at present. It might be that the Vermillion country would never see them again. Le Grand Marais had more back doors than a muskrat's home.

"Well," he observed philosophically, "at least we have horses. We won't have to hoof it back to the river."

HE KNEW well enough that news of the robbery would bring Clavelly upriver in jig time. Since it was the man's boast that he had stamped out lawlessness on the Vermillion, he was certain to be annoyingly indignant over this affair at Long John's landing. Larned's first glimpse of the wharf revealed the police launch already tied up there. The sergeant whistled his surprise.

"Clavelly not only got here on the double quick," he thought, "but from the look of things, he's brought the whole detachment with him. Lord knows what for, unless he proposes to throw every man Jack of us into the Grand Marais."

Larned groaned at that prospect.

"It will be worse than the stupid patrol he led us on last fall in the Burnt River slashings," he brooded. "We'll be cut to ribbons and accomplish exactly nothing."

From the moment of his arrival in

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Kitchewan Inspector Clavelly had been a thorn in his flesh. The man might have been capable enough in some down-east post, but he had come up the quick political way in the Force, and he was hopelessly over his head as officer commanding this Northern detachment.

"The skipper's got his dander up," Moran warned as Larned slipped down from the jaded horse. "He's waiting for you inside."

Clavelly had cleared the traderoom. His cropped mustache bristling and his florid face pinker than usual, he confronted Larned in frowning silence for a moment. They presented an illuminating contrast as they stood there; Larned disheveled, weary, his fatigue uniform caked with mud, and Clavelly spotlessly regimental, a certain air of distinction about him.

"Larned, this is a bad business," he began, his tone frigid. "Carmody tells me his peltries were worth thirty thousand dollars—putting it conservatively. Gad! Think of it! A bold, daylight robbery of such dimensions, right here on the Vermillion! Larned, what were you thinking of to permit such a thing to happen under your very nose? You saw the baled peltries on the wharf."

It took Larned a second or two to adjust himself to this. Whatever his difference of opinions with Clavelly, he had hardly expected to find himself made the goat of this affair. A thin, hard smile touched his mouth. The inspector began to fidget under his stare.

"If you are inviting me to take responsibility for this robbery, I can't oblige," Larned said. "In the old days, we covered every shipment of dust and furs that came under our eyes. It was done as a matter of course. When you speeded up the river patrols it was your express order that the men keep moving; that assistance was to be given when requested, not otherwise."

"There was nothing in the order to prevent a man from using his judgment," Clavelly answered hastily. He remembered his order and knew it was part of the record. "What have you to report?" he asked, glad the question was so handy.

Larned could only tell him that the outlaws had struck straight into the Big Mud.

"But certainly you have some idea as to their identity," Clavelly persisted.

"It was a clever job," Jim said. "Beaver Baily, Juneau Baker and Torgerson might have pulled it. They'd measure up to it. But a surmise is ridiculous, under the circumstances. There's a score of men in the Big Mud desperate enough to try anything."

"It was Baily and the other two who managed that holdup of the fur train at Berdan's Crossing," Clavelly declared emphatically. "And there's no doubt about the fourth man. Carmody says he recognized young MacNair.

"Does he?" Larned queried sharply. "He's changed his story then. He told me he couldn't swear it was MacNair."

"I—I believe he did put it that way," the inspector was forced to admit. "It's beside the point. I'm convinced it's young MacNair and the gang he was running with before he was sent away that we want. I've brought canoes and rifles with me. I'm going to clean out the Big Mud once for all. We'll burn every shack and shanty we locate. I propose to lead the patrol personally. We'll divide into parties of two and sweep out every inch of that country."

LARNED stared at him aghast, even pityingly. Clavelly bristled. "Plain to see you don't approve," he observed coldly.

"Inspector, what you are proposing to do is nothing short of suicide," Larned got out tensely. "If you had the whole division to send in there, you couldn't comb it out. You've got three rookie constables. They'll get lost; they'll overplay their hand. It will be nothing short of a miracle if they all come out alive. We'll paddle into one ambush after another. We'll be shot down without a chance to do anything about it.

"I tell you there's a thousand miles of

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waterways in that swamp and muskeg. The outlaws who infest it, know it like a book. If we push them ahead of us for a few hours, they'll slip around us by night. If we stay in there a month, burning their shacks and shooting every time we see a thing move, it won't come to anything. A week after we pull out, those renegades will be back there, roosting comfortably."

"You seem to have very decided ideas about it," Clavelly remarked sarcastically. "Just what would be your way, Larned?"

"I'd police the creeks that flow out of the Grand Marais, and keep it bottled up. After the freeze-up this fall, I'd send two seasoned men into the Big Mud. They wouldn't be in uniform; they'd be men who could live the life of outlaws. My only order to them would be to stick until they located Carmody's furs. Find those peltries and you've got the men who stole them."

"That's all rather fantastic, Larned," Clavelly remarked patronizingly. "I'm wondering just how you propose to identify those peltries. Carmody tells me he never stamps his skins."

"No, but he's marked them for years. An inked thumbprint. If you didn't know, you might think it was just a black smear."

Inspector Clavelly went red to the ears. "I must say this is a priceless bit of information for you to hold back."

"It's priceless only if it is held back," Larned corrected him. "Long John isn't aware that I know. It is his secret and our only real clue."

"I think we have clues enough," Clavelly said in crisp dismissal. "I don't propose to sit by for months, twiddling my thumbs. I'll strike quick and hard. We'll leave here immediately and proceed up river to Mississagan Creek. We'll anchor the launch there and take to the canoes. Here is the list of the way I want the detachment broken up."

"You blundering fool," Larned thought as he clicked his heels in a curt salute. "If Rick MacNair is at the wrong end of this robbery he'll laugh himself to death when he sees us busting into the Big Mud!"

CHAPTER V

'WARE THE BIG MUD

AN HOUR after pulling away from the police launch at the mouth of Mississagan Creek in twos, the detachment spread out rapidly. A maze of creeks and channels had opened before them. Constable Moran accompanied Larned. For the better part of an hour they worked their way through a series of openings and passages in the tules, with little being said.

"Clavelly expects us to nail the gents who got Carmody's peltries," Moran growled at last. " 'Burn down the huts and shacks, and take anyone you meet into custody,' " he repeated their instructions with fine scorn. "Why, hell! First thing you know, we'll be shooting at each other. I predict we won't be in here three days before the old man cries quits."

He was only echoing Larned's private surmise. But the detachment wallowed in the Big Mud for three days without a shot being fired to break the brooding, ominous stillness. Distress signals had been arranged: three quick shots, followed by three more. The two men often paused to listen, but no sound of firing reached them.

They had had one or two brief glimpses of other police canoes. Of Clavelly they had seen nothing; nor had they caught sight of any possible quarry. This third morning, however, smoke stained the sky in several directions.

"Somebody's getting burned out," Moran observed dourly. "Somebody that ain't going to like it, if you ask me." He studied the current for a few minutes. "You know where we are, Jim? The creeks are running to the north now."

"This is the Swiftwater Flowage," Larned said. "Never heard any other name for it. If we're going to have a fight in here it will come pretty quick now."

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It wasn't twenty minutes later that Moran held up his paddle for silence. Scattered firing reached them from far off to their right. It died away as they listened.

"What do you think?" Moran asked.

Larned shook his head. "No telling. Too far away for us to do anything about it."

The words were barely cold on his tongue, however, when rifles began to bark directly ahead of them.

"Coming close now," Dinny growled. "That ain't a mile away."

The shooting ended as abruptly as it had begun.

"Keep your rifle handy," Larned jerked out. "We're going to edge into this and see what it's all about."

The lead they were following grew so narrow they could touch the cat-tails and marsh grass on either side. When it seemed it would pinch out altogether, it widened and a straight stretch of open water lay before them that ran on for a mile or more. Even though they hugged the tules on one side of the open water, they were an easy target for a bushwhacker as they proceeded cautiously. Cross channels cut into this main body of water.

Moran suddenly grabbed his rifle, so hastily that the canoe acted as if it were going over. Two canoes had swept out of a cross channel only eighty yards ahead of them.

"Put down your gun!" Larned sang out. "They're police canoes!"

"I'm getting jumpy," Moran muttered. And then, "That's Bill Strange in the first one. Tommy Dorcas was with him. He must be down. They're signaling us."

AS THEY came alongside, Larned's lean face tightened grimly. Constable Dorcas lay in a heap on the bottom of Constable Bill Strange's canoe. Strange had been wounded too. The right sleeve of his tunic was blood-soaked. Constables Renault and Mize, the two men in the second canoe, had not escaped unscathed.

"Nice little massacre you boys had for yourselves," Moran began, when Larned stopped him.

"Bill, is Dorcas badly wounded?"

Strange nodded soberly, but for the corporal's benefit, he said: "He'll make it, all right. But he sure needs a doctor. I'm taking him back to the launch."

"You're banged up yourself," Jim declared. "All of you are. What did you run into?"

"Renault and Mize had their private shindig over east early this morning," Strange explained. "We just bumped into them a few minutes ago. Tommy and I were alone when the slugs began slapping us in the face. We burned those shacks on Turkey Island—you know the place—and bashed in half a dozen canoes. This is what it got us."

Dorcas groaned in his agony. Strange shook his head, and with his lips formed the word "bad." He was the veteran of the detachment and a man to have along when the going got tough.

"I didn't see their canoe at first," he continued. "Lying under some swamp cedars. Three men in it. The lad got it almost the first crack out of the box."

"Bill, who were they?" Now that he had asked the question, Larned caught himself dreading the answer, fearful lest Rick MacNair's name be given him.

"I had my sights set at four hundred yards," Strange told him. "Couldn't recognize 'em at that distance."

Larned was conscious of a guilty sense of relief. "Which way did they go?"

"Before they'd paddled ten yards, I lost sight of 'em. No telling where they went. . . . Lord, Jim, you ain't thinking of going after 'em?" he burst out hotly. "Find the old man; make him call this thing off. We've got to get to a doctor. You'll find Clavelly somewhere in that nest of small islands where Larry Heflin was washed out four years ago."

"What about our fifth canoe?" Larned demanded. "Innis and Kelly are in here somewhere."

"They're well out of it, Jim," Strange told him. "They managed to surprise old Pete LaBelle last evening. They took him into custody and they're on their way to

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the launch with him. . . . Jim, you've got to find Clavelly and pound a little sense into him." He pointed to Dorcas. "It's up to you."

"I'll find him," Larned said. "You boys get moving. We'll meet you at the river."

LESS than thirty minutes after they parted, Larned suddenly sent the canoe darting into the tules.

"What?" Moran demanded. The next moment he saw the black canoe far up the lead. It carried three men. One of them stood up and scanned the opening. "The gents that did for Tommy Dorcas and Bill," Constable Moran growled. "Put your glasses on 'em. Who in hell are they?"

Clapping the binoculars to his eyes, Larned made himself the silent promise that if one of them proved to be Rick it must not matter now. Death had spread its dark wings over the Big Mud; Tommy Dorcas was dying. There couldn't be any mercy for his killers, even though one of them proved to be Laurie MacNair's brother.

A grunt of satisfaction escaped the sergeant as he gazed through the glasses.

"MacNair?" Dinny asked.

"No! Torgerson, Baily and Juneau Baker." He could see at a glance that the canoe carried no peltries. "Got them cached," he thought.

"They're moving this way now," Moran got out tensely.

"Let 'em come. We're not wasting any time on these gents. Shoot for the waterline and sink their canoe." He whipped his rifle to his shoulder. His shot racketed over the dark water the next moment. Moran's rifle spoke.

"We were low. Try again!" Jim commanded.

Baker and the others were pumping their guns by now. Experts with a rifle, it didn't take them long to get the range. A slug slapped into Moran's service hat and carried it away. "Close!" he muttered. Larned felt a bullet burn past his face.

"Their canoe is making water," he said, "but we can't wait for it to fill. Let 'em have it!"

"With pleasure!" Dinny said fiercely. He shouted with satisfaction as he saw Juneau Baker's rifle go flying from his hands. Larned fired deliberately. "The big Swede's down!" Moran cried. "You musta got him awful close to the ticker that time."

Beaver Baily, huge, hairy, squatting in the stern of the black canoe, suddenly threw down his rifle and grabbed a paddle. A mighty sweep with it sent the canoe crashing through the tules.

It needed no word from Larned to send them streaking down the channel after the outlaws. The spot where the black canoe had left this stretch of open water was plain reading to both. They followed through. A matter of ten yards brought them to more open water. Larned swept it carefully with his binoculars. There was no sight of the renegades.

"They've given us the slip," Jim was forced to admit. "Worse still, we can't go after them; we've got to think of Dorcas; we've got to find Clavelly."

Locating the inspector did not prove to be an easy matter. There were miles and miles of narrow channels in among the scrub-covered island. Noon came and went before they were electrified by the sound of three shots, quickly followed by three more.

"That's Clavelly!" Moran exclaimed. "In trouble too!"

"Come on," Larned muttered. "I've located those shots pretty well."

HALF an hour later Inspector Clavelly and Constable Ingham hailed him from one of the islands.

"I'm stranded here," Clavelly called across the water, boiling with anger. "I came ashore to search this island. When I got back to the canoe, it was gone—stolen!"

Larned managed to hold his face straight, but Moran could not repress a chuckle. "Too bad we can't leave him here," he said under his breath.

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Larned reported the condition and whereabouts of the detachment, and gave a terse account of what had happened.

"We've accomplished something. I knew we would," Clavelly said with satisfaction. That met with a heavy silence from Moran and Larned. The inspector felt it. Face flushed, he said in a hasty attempt to cover up: "We've shown these outlaws that we mean business. They know Carmody's peltries are too hot to handle for a few weeks. When those peltries, with their identifying marks, do show up, we'll make some arrests."

Larned could stand no more of it. "Inspector, Corporal Dorcas is dying; Constable Strange, Mize and Renault are in immediate need of medical attention. We can't return to the launch too soon."

"Of course, of course," Clavelly agreed with strange humility.

Tommy Dorcas died two days later. Getting his slayers was now a personal matter with Larned and the others.

For better than a fortnight, Clavelly kept the patrols busy watching the trading posts on the Vermillion and Swiftwater. They found no sign of Long John Carmody's peltries. The inspector began to look harassed. Even he knew that it was getting late in the season to ship furs outside.

ONE afternoon Larned was in barracks, making himself regimental after a long patrol, when Dinny Moran came in in search of him. From the look on Moran's face it was plain that he bore news.

"Bill Strange just reported back from the Swiftwater patrol," he announced. "Listen to this: Rick MacNair left home a week ago, after another row with his father. Old Duncan ordered him to clear out for good. Bill says Rick hasn't been seen since."

Larned's face did not change. He said, "Where is Bill now?"

"Come along with me," Moran said.

On request, Strange told Larned what he had told Moran. It was not much. He had only stopped in at MacNair's post on his way to Two Loon, where he had checked up on the report of sickness in Little Otter's band of Crees.

"You're sure Rick hasn't been seen since he left Duncan's place, Bill?" Larned demanded. Strange said he was. "What about Bat LaFlamme," the former pursued. "Was he around?"

"He wasn't around the post," was the answer. "But I got a flash of him from Long John's place. He was moving up the Vermillion. I followed him until he left the river."

"Where was that?"

"At the mouth of the Mississagan. He was headed for the Big Mud."

"Did he see you?"

Bill smiled faintly. "He couldn't have," he said. And then: "Appears I ain't the only one that's been asking himself questions about LaFlamme."

Larned refused to be drawn out, but as he and Moran turned away, his lean face was grim. Dinny burst out, "Jim, that settles it! Rick MacNair's in the Big Mud. LaFlamme's in touch with him—keeping him informed."

Larned said stoically, "You're grabbing at guesses again."

"Jim, I know how tough all this is for you. But you're saying one thing and thinking another. But you know I'm right. Putting on this uniform doesn't make us all little brothers. We stick together pretty well, though.

"One thing we can be proud of: Never kill a Mountie, we warned the blacklegs. For forty years, ever since old Superintendent Starrance's time, we've made those words good. We've got to make them good this time.

"Tommy Dorcas wouldn't be sleeping up on the hill but for Rick MacNair. We've got to square that, no matter how the chips fall."

"I hope I'm the one to do it," Larned murmured. "But Lord, fella, you've got to have facts—evidence! You can't go ahead on suspicion alone. Something will break this case. Those horses will be

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claimed. Maybe that will give us the line we need."

Before more could be said, Constable Ingham hurried up to them. "Inspector wants you in right away, Sergeant," he announced.

Larned nodded. A few minutes later he was meeting Clavelly's official gaze across the latter's desk.

"Sergeant, you'll make an emergency patrol up the Swiftwater to Two Loon Lake," said the inspector formally. "Constable Strange reports an epidemic of probable typhoid in Little Otter's band but was not equipped to deal with it. You'll draw what you need from the dispensary, get an outboard, and start immediately."

With a click of his heels, Larned saluted. Turning away at once, he left to make ready. An hour later he was on his way up the Vermillion.

CHAPTER VI

DEAD MAN'S RUN

REACHING the junction of the rivers, Larned headed up the Swiftwater without stopping at Long John's post. Two hours later, he reached Dead Man's Run. It was in full flood, and, without the kicker, he would have been forced to drag his canoe up its ten tortuous miles. But with the outboard purring smoothly, and keeping a keen eye out for the white water and hidden shoals, he forged through with nothing worse than a good wetting.

He struck out for MacNair's post at last, his thoughts as dark and gloomy as the river. In the past Laurie had never failed to send him a note when chance offered. The fact that he had not heard from her told him plainly enough that things had gone from bad to worse with her. And he knew the end was not yet.

A feeble sun broke through the gray clouds as he came within hailing distance of the post. Old Duncan sat out on his veranda, his short pipe clamped in his mouth and his dog Silver stretched out at his feet. The old man waved a sober greeting.

On his way up to the house, Larned heard a door open. Laurie came out and stood behind her father's chair, managing a smile for their visitor. After the first greetings old Duncan said bluntly, "Do ye bring wor-r-rd of the boy, Jim?"

"No," Larned was able to answer.

"You know he is not here any more?"

Jim nodded. This was straight, direct talk, and he welcomed it. "I don't see LaFlamme around," he said.

"Bat's trading on Lac Malheur," Laurie told him. "He left this morning." And then, with sharpened interest: "Did you want to see him?"

Larned said no and explained his presence. "I thought I'd save time by taking the trail to Two Loon and borrowing one of your canoes over there, Duncan."

"Of course," the old man agreed. "You've always used them. Why not now?"

"We'll have a bite to eat first," Laurie said. "If there's nothing in the Regulations to forbid it, I'll go to the lake with you. Neeta went home to her people yesterday when she heard about this sickness. I don't imagine it's as serious as typhoid. Probably just a few cases of influenza."

At her suggestion that she accompany him Larned felt himself relax. "Come along, by all means," he urged. "There's certainly nothing in the manual to forbid an errand of mercy."

She called them inside a few minutes later. The big dog came in with MacNair and sprawled at his feet, pretending to sleep, long nose between paws, but with a twitching ear for every word spoken.

Old Duncan stared at his food and ate only at Laurie's insistence, and then but a mouthful.

"Father, you can't go on this way," she pleaded. "Waiting day after day for something dreadful to happen. You heard Jim say there is no news of Rick. He would know."

The old man shook his head sadly.

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"There will be news," he murmured. "And it will be sad news when it comes." He gazed at Larned for a long moment, suffering in his old eyes. "Ye can't be knowing what this is costing me, Jim. A hundred times a day I ask mysel' where I could have failed the boy. Was I too hard—too stern?"

He shook his head in sober reflection. "I dinna ken the truth of it. His mither was a bonnie lass, gentle and without ever a mean thocht in her mind. It isn't her blood speaking in him. It must be the MacNair strain. I was wild in my youth, never heeding advice nor buckling under to any mon. The blame must be mine—"

"No, Father," Laurie insisted, "the blame isn't yours. Rick had his chance. If he comes to a bad end, he can blame only himself. No man in all this Thorofare country is better thought of than you."

DUNCAN MACNAIR waited until she had finished, then fastened his eyes on Larned again. "Jim, it's a grievous thing for a mon to have to deny his roof to his own son; but the lad left me no other course. I see ye dinna ken what we quarreled aboot. So I'll tell ye.

"Ye warned him to keep out of the Big Mud and stay away from the blacklegs he had been running with. I repeated the warning many times. His answer was to bring Swede Torgerson here with a slug in his chest and ask me to remove it."

"Torgerson?" Larned said quickly. It was all plain reading now.

"Torgerson," old Duncan repeated. "I tell ye, the boy's gone clean daft. He's in with Baker and the others as thick as ever. There's no point in a mon closing his eyes to the truth. John Carmody was richt when he thocht he recognized Rick. Long John may try to spare my feelings, but I canna do it."

Larned heard Laurie choke back her anguish, but old Duncan's words were such a true echo of what he himself had been thinking all along that he could think of little to say to soften the truth. He glanced at Laurie, and she semed to read his thought.

"It isn't necessary to say anything, Jim," she murmured. "The truth seems pretty obvious."

"I don't know," he said for her sake. "If Rick had a hand in that robbery, we'll know when the stolen peltries show up. Till then, I wouldn't distress myself needlessly, if I were you."

In turn Laurie, for her father's sake, pretended to be impressed by his logic. "You're right, of course," she declared. "How could John Carmody have recognized Rick when he was masked?"

Duncan MacNair made no comment. Leaving the table, he went into the trade-room and slumped down in a chair before the wood fire, the dog Silver at his heels. He was still there, puffing his pipe in a brooding silence, when Laurie and Larned left half an hour later on the three-mile trail through the timber to Two Loon Lake.

The sickness in Little Otter's camp proved to be no more serious than Laurie had surmised. Larned doled out some medicine and advice. As a further precaution he insisted that the camp be moved down the lake immediately, refusing to leave until the change had been made. As a result, the afternoon was well along before Laurie and he started back across the lake.

There was happiness for both in just being together. For a brief hour or two they put Rick out of their minds. The world was suddenly good again. Reaching the timber, they started over the trail arm in arm. The three miles became one all too soon for Larned, and it needed only Laurie's warm laughter to send his blood racing. Impulsively he reached out and drew her into his arms.

"Laurie, my leave is coming up next month. We could go Outside—to Edmonton—on our honeymoon. Darling, there's no reason why we should wait—"

He felt her lips brush his cheek as she trembled in his embrace. "Jim, please! Don't ask me now," she whispered. "You

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know what my answer must be. I told you last fall that I would never stand in your way, no matter how much you meant to me. Things have only become more difficult for me. You must understand, Jim."

"I do understand," he told her. "It isn't the waiting I mind. You're unhappy. When you laughed just now, it startled me; it's been so long since I heard you laugh. No matter what becomes of Rick, as my wife you never would stand in my way. You know I'm right, Laurie."

Whatever her answer might have been, it went unspoken as a mad crashing in the brush ahead brought them to sharp attention. A moment later a man burst into the trail, his excitement evident. It was Bat LaFlamme.

"MacNAIR—on de pos'!" he gasped. "Somet'ing terrible ees happen, Sergeant! He's lay on de floor—Silver too; I tak' wan look and run for catch you! I don'—"

"Hold on!" Larned cut in curtly. "Let me get this straight. What happened to Duncan?"

"He's kill—dead!"

Laurie's cry knifed into Larned, but he didn't take his eyes off the big Frenchman. "Killed?" he snapped, trying to find his own answer to Bat's excited gesturing. "How?"

"Somewan shoot heem. I fin' heem on de floor. De dog ees dere too, his head busted. You come queeck, Sergeant!" He would have started back without more words.

"Wait!" Larned barked, all his suspicions of the man intensified in a flash. "You went to Lac Malheur this morning. What brought you back so early?"

"All day I have feeling somet'ing ees wrong," LaFlamme protested. "I'm hurry back, and dat is what I fin'—"

"And you knew exactly where to locate us, eh?" Jim cut him off.

Something flickered in the Frenchman's obsidian eyes for an instant. His glance darted to the girl. "I'm know Laurie ees goin' on Two Loon Lak'. She say she go. When I fin' your canoe smash and sunk in de *rivière,* den I guess easy you go wid her—"

It was plausible. Larned nodded curtly. There were other questions he would have liked to put, but they could wait. He turned to Laurie. "Thank God, I'm here to help you. You've got to hang on to your courage now, Laurie."

She looked up at him.

"I'll try, Jim—" Her voice was very low and her face was dead white, but she did not break.

Hurrying back to the post, Larned turned over what he knew. "You say you saw no one at all, LaFlamme? You've no idea who might have done this thing?" His voice was sharp.

"*Non,* I see not'ing," Bat answered. "But M'sieu Mac ees have trouble las' mont' wit' dose Crees on Mystaire Creek. Mebbe they do thees—"

It was possible, Larned conceded. He knew the band LaFlamme mentioned, an ugly crowd.

Making for the traderoom at once, Larned pleaded with Laurie to remain outside.

"I must go in!" she insisted.

She stifled an exclamation on seeing her father. He lay in the middle of the floor. Blood from the wound in his chest had stained the boards under him.

Larned moved forward and knelt beside the old man. His examination was brief. The trader had been dead for an hour or more.

"Isn't there anything that we can do for him?" Laurie asked. She was crying softly now. Larned's answer was a headshake. He took a blanket from the counter and drew it over old Duncan.

Straightening, he turned to look at the dog. What LaFlamme had said was so; the great silver-gray animal lay near the door in a welter of blood from the wound which had laid his scalp open, a blood-stained shovel on the floor beside it.

"How could it have happened?" Laurie cried. "Who can have done this to Father? Why would they want to do it?"

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CHAPTER VII

ASK THE DOG

LARNED had already asked himself those very questions. Making a swift but thorough examination of the trade-room, he stepped outside and searched the ground with care. A moment later he returned.

"Four or five men were here, from the tracks," he said. Laurie only gazed at him, her eyes anguished. He turned to LaFlamme.

"Did MacNair keep any sizeable sum of money here at the post?"

The Frenchman shrugged. "He keep some, I don' know where. He nevaire tell me." He made it plain from his manner that MacNair's secretiveness had been a sore point with him. Then, gesturing toward the girl: "Laurie, she knows."

"No great amount, Jim," Laurie answered. "It must have been the peltries they wanted—"

"We'll see," Larned declared. "Where's the key to the fur house, LaFlamme?"

"M'sieu Mac always carry heem."

Kneeling beside the body, Larned went through the old man's pockets. Presently he found the key. He straightened.

"That's strange," he said thoughtfully. "If they got into the fur house, what is the key doing here in Duncan's pocket?" Then, sharply, "You come with me, LaFlamme."

Whatever he expected to find behind the locked door, Larned was utterly unprepared for what he did discover. Certainly the fur house had not been cleaned out. In fact, it was literally packed with skins.

Staring at the sorted piles of mink and marten, beaver and fox and muskrat, Larned found many of his calculations brought to nought. Men as prominent as Duncan MacNair were not killed for a mere whim of vengeance, even in this thinly settled Thorofare country. If not for MacNair's peltries, then for what reason had this cold-blooded murder been performed?

Larned shot a look at LaFlamme, attracted by his silence. The big Frenchman was gazing into the fur house, an apparently puzzled look on his swarthy features.

"Ees not'ing wrong 'ere," Bat grunted, as if some comment was expected of him. He was watching Larned like a cat. Jim caught it and noticed the big fellow's relief when he agreed with him that the peltries seemed to be in order.

"Whatever the reason for killing Duncan, it apparently wasn't to steal his furs," he observed. His glance returned to the piles of skins.

"Mebbe we miss somet'ing back in de traderoom," Bat sugegsted. "Somet'ing you overlook, Sergeant—"

But Larned wasn't listening. He had taken one of the pelts in his hand, turning it over as if he would find there the solution he sought. A shock ran through him as he missed the usual stamp which MacNair had used for years. Studying the skin more closely, he found himself staring at an inky smear. It was Long John Carmody's thumb-print.

Keeping himself grimly in hand, Larned bent down and turned over another pelt; then another and another. Three out of four carried the blurred smudge of a carelessly applied inky thumb. Larned knew the truth then. He had found the stolen furs, hidden here in Duncan MacNair's fur house.

IT STAGGERED him for a second. Not for a moment did he believe that Duncan MacNair had been involved in the robbery. But here the peltries were, in his fur house. Who so likely as Rick had placed them there? But why? Obviously the old man had been killed over these skins. Grabbing at surmises, Larned came up with one that made him hold his breath.

Face inscrutable, he turned to LaFlamme. He asked himself whether Bat suspected what he had discovered. LaFlamme's stolid look reassured him.

"Seems there's little to be learned here," Larned said. "I'll have another look in the

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traderoom. Lock up, and bring the key in with you when you come."

Bat took the key with a nod, willing enough to do as he was directed. Over his shoulder he shot a keen look at the Mountie's retreating back, which would have greatly interested Jim.

Larned had tossed aside without hesitation the possibility that Duncan MacNair had had anything to do with secreting the stolen skins. But he realized that Carmody's peltries could have been disposed of without the slightest breath of suspicion through MacNair's regular trade channels, the man's known honesty guaranteeing the thieves the best protection they could hope to find.

That the skins were here, while Duncan lay dead on his own trade-room floor, put another complexion on the matter. The skin of Larned's lean cheeks tightened as he found himself face to face with the only possible answer: Rick MacNair.

He was just as sure that LaFlamme had been a party to the crime; that the Frenchman had waited up the river for the others and never gone near Lac Malheur.

And yet, despite this certainty, Larned realized that what had happened here today was far from being solved. He thought of Laurie; this thing was to become even more terrible for her.

Stepping into the traderoom, he found her standing behind the counter, a twelve-inch section of a log, working on hinges, like a cunningly hidden door, standing open before her and revealing a tiny compartment in the wall. Larned understood at a glance that it was there old Duncan had kept his money hidden.

Hearing his step, Laurie turned toward him swiftly, attempting to close the secret compartment without detection. Her face was drawn and white.

"Wait, Laurie," he urged quietly, approaching. "I couldn't help seeing. That is where your father kept his money, isn't it?" And when she could only nod yes, he asked: "Is it there now?"

"No." The word was no more than a whisper. "It's gone, Jim. It's been taken!"

He watched her narrowly, reading the terrified thoughts which she strove to hide. "It means that Rick *has* been here today," he went on levelly. "We've got to face the truth."

Fear flared suddenly in her eyes, and her tense voice broke. "Why do you say that?" she gasped.

"Only your father, Rick, and you knew where the money was hidden. Isn't that true?"

"Perhaps Father was forced to open the cache—"

But she broke off, and hopelessness sagged her shoulders. "Did you find anything in the fur house?" she asked tonelessly.

He told her the truth. She saw as quickly as he what it meant. "Jim, Rick couldn't have done this thing!" she reiterated desperately. "Nothing could induce him to lay a hand on Father!"

"No," he agreed slowly; "I can't quite believe that of him, myself. Probably what happened was this: Rick had three or four others with him. One of them saw how neatly Carmody's peltries could be disposed of through your father. They may have decided to put pressure on him, make him handle the skins whether he chose to or not. A threat of Rick's exposure would do the trick, or so they expected. But apparently there was a hitch."

Laurie could not agree with his reading of the situation. "If Father refused, as I know he would, and they shot him down, they never would have left the pelts in the fur house," she declared.

"Not unless it occurred to them that your father's estate would be settled in a short time."

"But in that case, half of the estate would come to me."

"That's just it!" He caught her up quickly. "The other half would go to Rick; and that's maybe precisely what they were figuring on. Carmody's pelts would be disposed of as part of the estate. Even if they were forced to sacrifice half of the proceeds, it would net them more than disposing of the hot furs through a

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crooked buyer, who'd offer only a fraction of what they are worth."

A SLIGHT sound at the door whirled Larned around. Bat LaFlamme stood there, a suspicious glint in his beady eyes.

"You fin' out anyt'ing, Sergeant?" he asked.

Larned shook his head. "Nothing I didn't already know." He had the feeling that the Frenchman suspected he had made a mistake in leaving them together.

The charged stillness of the room was abruptly shattered by a low moan from the dog they had supposed dead. The surprise of it held Larned motionless a moment. LaFlamme, superstitious to a degree, fell back a step, a smothered curse on his lips.

"Bat, don't stand there half scared," Laurie cried. "You brought Silver to Father as a pup. You know how fond he was of him. Can't you do something for him?"

"No use for let heem suffer lak dat," said LaFlamme. "Mebbe bes' t'ing I do ees drag heem outside an' finish heem."

"No, I won't let you kill him," Laurie said flatly. "Get some water and a towel. We'll do what we can."

Larned had been bending down over the dog. He straightened as Bat left the room. "I've an idea he's going to be all right," he told Laurie. "We won't try to patch him up now. I'm too anxious to see what he does when he comes to."

Laurie gazed at him, not understanding. "What do you mean, Jim?"

"That Silver may be our witness. He was here when your father was killed."

LaFlamme returned before he could say more.

"Put the basin on the counter," Larned told him. "The dog's coming around all right. We'll wait a few minutes." And then: "Bat, Silver has always been friendly to you, hasn't he?"

LaFlamme eyed him narrowly. *"Oui!* W'y you ask dat, Sergeant?"

"I just wanted to be sure," Jim answered quietly.

The dog had its eyes open by now. It raised its great head groggily and then slowly pulled itself up on its front paws. It blinked its eyes vaguely at Laurie and Larned. Its attention went to LaFlamme then and stayed there. Suddenly the big dog stiffened. Its long shoulder hair began to roach menacingly. A growl rumbled in its throat.

Unconsciously Big Bat fell back a step. Silver's strength was returning rapidly now. That fierce growl came again. Larned could see the dog hunching its shoulders. The next instant it sprang through the air at LaFlamme, its fangs driving straight for the Frenchman's throat.

Just in time Big Bat flung up a beam-like arm protectingly. Even so, only the weakness of the dog saved him. Flung aside, Silver's long jaws clicked on empty space and the dog fell back to the floor with a thud.

It was enough for Larned—evidence that could not be denied—proof beyond argument that in Bat LaFlamme he had the man who had killed Duncan MacNair.

Whipping out his belt gun, he leveled it at Big Bat.

"Throw up your hands, LaFlamme!" he ordered. "I'm arresting you for the murder of Duncan MacNair!"

CHAPTER VIII

THEY RIDE THE RIVER

LAFLAMME stood there at bay for a moment, desperate, wasting no breath on vain denials, nor bothering to ask himself how much Larned knew. Suddenly springing around the corner of the counter, he snatched up a long skinning knife that lay there and hurled it at Jim.

It was done in an instant, but his aim could scarcely have been bettered. Cutting through the lanyard of Larned's belt gun, the knife slashed across his knuckles and the gun fell to the floor. With blood streaming from his hand Jim leaped at Big Bat.

The big fellow was ready for Jim. He

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avoided Larned's rushing blow and bored in. Savagely he struck; his granite fist bounced off Jim's jaw.

Larned weathered it. A lashing blow broke through the Frenchman's guard. Catching him on the point of the chin, it sent Bat crashing into the wall. Down on his knees, LaFlamme reached for the fallen gun. Before his fingers could close on it Jim sent it clattering across the room with his foot.

Scrambling to his feet, LaFlamme changed his tactics. This standing up to a man and trading blow for blow was not his way of fighting. He flung his arms wide and leaped at his foe.

Larned knew he must keep beyond reach of those huge bearish arms which held the power to crush life out of a man. Straightening sharply as LaFlamme rushed, he unleashed a blow with everything he had behind it. The Frenchman tried to avoid it, but he was not quick enough. The door opening on the veranda was directly behind him. Larned's fist lifted him and drove him backward and LaFlamme half-fell, half-staggered into the open.

Watching in deep amazement, Laurie saw what was coming even before it occurred. Her warning cry had no effect. Even Larned was powerless to spring forward in time as LaFlamme slammed into the rotting rail at the veranda's edge. The dry cedar sticks snapped like pipestems. With scarcely a break in his momentum, Big Bat plunged over and down, to land in the swirling Swiftwater, a dozen feet below.

Stopping only to recover his gun, Larned ran to the broken railing. Carried along by the rushing current, and instantly revived by his plunge into the ice-cold river, he saw Bat making for the shore with swift strokes. Fifty yards down the bank he crawled out of the water, started to run.

"Halt!" Larned cried after him. "Stop where you are, LaFlamme, or I'll fire!"

Only running the faster for the warning, the Frenchman made for the scrub junipers at the river's edge.

Larned fired. The shot failed of effect, as he intended it should. "Stop!" he yelled again.

Instead of complying, Bat dragged a canoe out of its hiding place. Clearly he had prepared against such a moment as this. Dropping the light shell into the water, he shoved off with a mighty lunge as Larned fired again. The current caught the craft, swept it downstream. A second or two and LaFlamme was safely beyond pistol range.

Larned stood on the veranda watching him go and silently cursing himself. "Only a blundering fool could have played it this way!" he growled. "To have him dead to rights and let him get away like this! Left here high and dry without any way of taking after him!"

"Jim, I've got to know what all this means," Laurie's voice was as taut as a strung piano wire. "Do you know what happened, or are you just guessing?"

"Guessing?" he snapped. "It's plain enough. They were all here—Baker, the Swede, Baily, Rick. And LaFlamme was waiting for them. He never went to Lac Malheur. When your father refused to dispose of Carmody's peltries, there was a fight. LaFlamme killed your father then. Can you doubt it? Silver knew!"

"Bat—turning on Father like that!" she murmured, her voice choked.

"Yes, and poisoning Rick. You've often wondered what turned him into a renegade. Well, you know now. It was LaFlamme. They're heading for the Big Mud, but they'll hardly leave the lower Swiftwater before evening. Soon as it gets dark, they'll swing into the Vermillion and pass Carmody's place. I've got to find some way of going after them!"

"There's the old raft we use to bring our vegetables across the river from the garden," Laurie suggested quickly. "It's well lashed together. Bat put a new sweep on it last fall."

Larned groaned as he gazed at the clumsy, unwieldy raft half-drawn up on the bank below. Navigating the Run with it seemed worse than impossible. But it

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was this or nothing. So it would be this.

"All right," he decided. "You'll have to go with me, Laurie. I'll need you at the sweep; I'll do the poling. You get a coat. I'll carry your father into the bedroom."

Silver gazed at him inquiringly as he picked up the body. "No time for you now, oldtimer," he muttered.

GETTING the raft into the water did not take long. No sooner had the full sweep of the current caught it than Larned realized afresh the hazardousness of what he was attempting.

The unbroken walls of spruce began to flash past them. If the speed of the raft was great here, he could imagine what it would be once they reached the Run. "And that bunch will never hole up this side of it and risk it after dark," he told himself.

That LaFlamme was hurrying downriver to join them, he took for granted. But Bat would be sure that he had left Larned stranded at the post. "The best I can hope to do is to slip past them and, with some help from Carmody, bottle them up before they pass his place."

There was a crude deck and coaming on the old raft, but both he and Laurie were wet to the skin before they had gone a mile. Save for fending off a drifting log or two Larned had nothing to do.

"Better let me take the sweep," he called to the girl. She shook her head.

Gazing at her, Larned told himself that the strain she had been under this afternoon would have broken most men. And he had no right to risk her life in this fashion. Already he could hear the distant thunder of white water in the Run.

"There's no turning back," he muttered. "With luck, we'll make it! We've got to!"

He glanced at Laurie again as the first series of rapids raced toward them. "You'll have to keep your eyes peeled every second now!" he warned. "If we hit, don't let yourself be thrown into the river. Hang onto the raft, whatever you do!"

She nodded, her face resolute. Thoughts were racing through her mind that he little suspected in the urgency of the moment. Somewhere down the Swiftwater her father's killers were waiting. LaFlamme and the others must pay for their crime.

But she thought of Rick, young, weak, led astray, perhaps beyond saving, whatever chance opened to him now. Arrest for him must inevitably spell his doom, for in the eyes of the law he and the others were as guilty as the actual slayer.

Larned was using his paddle pole continuously now. They were traveling at express-train speed and he could feel the deck boards wrenching at the logs to which they were fastened.

One mile—two miles. It wasn't going to take long. It seemed only a matter of minutes before he recognized a landmark that told him they were almost out of the Run. He could see the lower portals—rocky walls rising sheer from the water, the river boiling white at their base—and out in midstream, observable only when the fast water broke over it, the sleek, wet fangs of Dead Man's Shoal.

"Keep her close in now, Laurie!" he shouted. "Throw all your weight into it!"

Laurie barely heard him. Her eyes were fixed on those fangs of rock; her mind was in turmoil. This raft was carrying Jim Larned swiftly toward Rick, and she was helping to send Rick to prison, probably to death. The wet rocks hypnotized her. A swing of the sweep and the raft would be splintered into kindling wood. Larned's chance of overtaking the fugitives would be gone.

The flat, muted crack of a rifle pulled her erect. Larned whipped out his belt gun as the rifle barked a second time and fired at a clump of scrub on the bank. The rifle spoke a third time, and she saw the pistol go sailing out of Jim's injured hand.

She knew what this firing meant—and knew as she had never known before what Jim Larned meant to her.

"Laurie!" he cried. "The rocks!"

Too late she tried to swing the raft across the current. With a crash that boomed above the roar of the river, it

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struck the reef. Lashings snapped like packthread and the raft fell apart under their feet, logs shooting into the air with all the fury of a breaking jam.

Even as they were flung into the water, Larned seized her, carried her with him.

CHAPTER IX

SOFTLY, REDCOAT

NOT until the current had carried them below the portal was Larned able to get Laurie out of the heavy, water-soaked coat that made swimming next to impossible.

Yard by yard they fought their way to the bank. Strong as she was, Laurie was exhausted long before the river loosened its grip on her. With his arm around her, Larned finally felt the sand under his feet and dragged her out of the water. Minutes passed before she could speak.

"Jim, it was all my fault," were her first feeble words.

"It wasn't your fault we were ambushed," he replied. "But don't worry, Laurie; it's enough that we're safe." He had broken his gun and dried it. "I'm going back after that bunch."

She sat up at that, fear in her face.

"No, Jim!" she pleaded. "You won't have a chance! They'll pick you off as you climb over the rocks!"

"I'll go back into the timber and circle around them," he reassured her. "You stay here. They won't harm you. Soon as I go, you wring the water out of your wet clothes."

Without giving her further chance to dissuade him, he disappeared in the brush. He knew that in another hour it would be black night. Moving swiftly and stealthily, he swung far around the portal and made his way back to the river. A murmur of voices warned him that he was close to the waiting men. Crawling forward carefully, he was finally able to part the branches of a young spruce and look down on their improvised camp.

He found Rick there as he expected, along with LaFlamme, Torgerson, Baily and Juneau Baker. He could overhear their talk.

"Dere's no use talk about eet, I'm goin' feenish dat Redcoat!" LaFlamme snarled. "He know too much!"

The argument was with young Rick.

"I don't mind your banging away at him in a fair fight," the latter answered. "But after the way he risked his neck getting Laurie out of the river, I'm damned if I'm going to see you bushwhack him!"

"His mouth has got to be closed before he gets a chance to talk or we'll all swing for what happened this afternoon," Juneau Baker put in grimly. "You go ahead, Bat, and make no mistakes!"

"You better not try it." Rick fingered his gun. "I'm sick of being pushed around by you guys. You killed the old man. I ain't taking nothing more off any of you!"

LaFlamme cursed him and started across the rocks. Rick whipped his rifle to his shoulder.

'Don't take another step, Bat!"

'he Frenchman whirled and brought up his own gun. They squeezed their triggers together, the two shots mingling into one and rolling away into the dim recesses of the timber.

For a moment, LaFlamme stood in his tracks, a look of shocked surprise on his swarthy face. Then he toppled forward and rolled down the steep pitch of the rocks, his big hulk bounding into the air at the end and plunging head first into the river. He was dead before he struck the water.

RICK still held his rifle leveled. His face was the color of old ashes. Larned saw that the front of him was already wet with blood.

"Anybody else want to take up—this argument—" Rick began, his words dying away to a whisper. Suddenly the gun fell from his loosened fingers and he crumpled up on the ground like an empty grain sack.

Baker and the others gathered around him.

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"This is the end of his string," Beaver Baily grunted.

Rick stirred and half-raised his head. What he said, Larned did not wait to catch. Stepping out of his concealment, he covered the three men and called to them to drop their guns and throw up their hands.

They recognized him without seeing him. After a moment's hesitation, they complied.

"Now back away, and stand there," he ordered after he had handcuffed them together. "I want a word with MacNair."

Rick met his eyes with cold, unabated hatred as he bent over him.

"Rick," Jim said slowly, "whatever you've been, you've come through at the finish."

A sound behind him whirled him around. It was Laurie.

"When I heard the shots, I had to follow you, Jim," she explained. And then, running forward, she cried: "Oh, Rick—"

Jim caught her by the shoulders, steadied her. "He's only got a few minutes to go, Laurie. I'm going to leave you alone with him."

He moved his prisoners down the shore a few yards and had them get their canoes ready for a quick run to Carmody's post. When Laurie rejoined him a few minutes later, she was dry-eyed and strangely relieved.

"He's gone; but I feel better," she said, low-voiced. "He said he wanted to go that way; he said it was best. I—I guess he was right, Jim. He told me about Bat and what happened this afternoon. It was just as you thought."

Larned put Baker and Torgerson in one canoe; Beaver Baily and Rick's body went in another. In the third canoe, which was to carry Laurie and him to the Vermillion, went the outlaws' rifles.

"I want you to keep the canoes close together," he warned them. "I'll fire, and there won't be any warning, if you try to pull away."

At Carmody's, he found the *Aurora* was due that evening. He arranged with Long John to bring Duncan MacNair's remains into town and put a man in charge of the peltries at the post until the Mounted could get a constable there. Shortly before midnight the steamboat arrived. Half an hour later, the prisoners locked up in the vessel's strong room, he and Laurie were on their way to Kitchewan.

Long after the other passengers had retired Laurie walked the deck, sleep impossible. Larned found her standing at the rail. Her hand stole into his and they stood there for minutes without speaking.

"Laurie," he murmured at last, "I'm not going to let you return to the post. We're going to be married next week. From now on, I'm taking charge of you, darling."

Suddenly her arms went around his neck and he drew her close. Her lashes were wet as they brushed his cheek.

"Jim," she barely whispered, "I'm afraid that's what I've always wanted—to have you take charge of me."

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 114, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 114, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

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Pushing through the drifts he moved forward, the sheep milling around him on all sides

The Last Drift

No Christmas Eve for old Billy Jones, retired cowman. Only a solitary meal, a solitary fire, a radio. And a chance to brand himself with that lowest of titles—sheepherder!

By BRUCE DOUGLAS
Author of "Billy Moss Resigns"

BILLY JONES peered into the living room, noted that it was empty, and stepped quietly in. He pulled a chair up toward the fireplace, sat down, and arranged the soft, tufted quilt around his knees and legs.

He fixed his face in an expression which he judged to be just halfway between "too sick" and "r'arin' to go," so that he could declare himself either one or the other as occasion might warrant.

He really didn't need to fix his face. Sixty years of riding the range, man and boy, in rain or blistering sun, hail or sub-zero blizzard, had weathered that face until it registered about as much expression as a well tanned cow hide. Sickness or health made no impression on it.

Too, it was a good mask behind which to conceal the deepening hurt which had been developing inside Billy for months. In spite of the hurt it showed no change, except that the crows-feet were a little deeper and the sun-faded blue eyes just a bit more glacial when he looked reservedly at his onetime cronies.

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Billy glanced down to make sure that the quilt concealed his spurs. On this one day of the year, December 24, the retired cowboys in the John Armstrong Home for Aged Sheepmen and Cattlemen were allowed to wear spurs; on all other days they were forbidden. They were too hard on floors and furniture.

Besides, they provided too strong a temptation in the rough-and-tumble scraps which sometimes climaxed the wordy squabbles between cowboys and sheepherders. One time Ed Claymore, having eared Lew Merrow down, had climbed onto his back and ridden him twice around the room like a bucking bronc before Nurse Hawley came in and stopped the brawl.

After that incident, spurs were banned —except on this one day, when everybody from the Home and everybody from the big Armstrong Sheep Ranch piled into special busses and rode to Durbin for the Christmas Eve festival.

But if Billy's were seen, they would be a dead give-away. He tucked the quilts in closer about them.

If Ed Claymore and Dick Shields and Montana Sam came in and wished him a happy birthday, he would throw off the quilt and go along. If they did not, he would pretend that his rheumatism was worse and stay right in this chair until they were all gone, and nobody would know that he had dressed to go out.

ON THAT, then, depended Billy's holiday—and whether the lump of ache inside him would disappear or grow bigger.

You can wish a total stranger a merry Christmas. But wishing a man a happy birthday implies an intimacy for which Billy had looked in vain ever since he had befriended the sheepherder.

Old men keep a quarrel alive long after it has passed into history. The quarrel was the basis of their lives, and keeping it alive is a denial that they themselves are superannuated.

Consequently, long after the fencing of the range had relegated the whole problem to the past, the sheep-cattle controversy was a living and raging argument in the John Armstrong Home for Aged Sheepmen and Cattlemen. That was the reason why the other cowboys in the Home considered Billy a traitor and held aloof from him when he made friends with Pete Fuller.

Pete had come into the Home half a year back, and died three months later of the heart trouble which had brought him there before he was quite sixty. He had a daughter, Rose Fuller, who taught the district school in a little mountain valley called Neilson's Park.

Four miles of side road connected the school with the main highway, bringing it in at the Pass, about halfway between Durbin and the Armstrong Ranch; and Rose used to drive in every Sunday and have dinner with her pa.

Even the cowboys in the Home liked Rose. But that didn't make them any warmer toward Pete.

When Pete came, Nurse Hawley spread the word that he was not to be excited. No arguments. Certainly no fights. If he put too much strain on that weak heart of his he might drop dead right at their feet.

Old Billy took those orders seriously; and that was why he didn't quarrel when Pete Fuller told that tall yarn about sheep.

It was after supper one night in August, and they were all sitting out on the big veranda. Pete Fuller told a wild tale about how he had driven fifteen thousand sheep through heavy drifts to rescue a pair of wolf hunters who were snow-bound in a cabin.

There was no animosity in Billy when he made his comment. He thought the man was just yarnin', the way he and Ed Claymore and Montana Sam did sometimes about cattle.

"Are you plumb shore," he drawled, "that it wa'n't a herd of elephants you was drivin', stid of sheep, with maybe Paul Bunyan's blue ox breakin' trail for the elephants? Sheep lie down an' die in a snowstorm. Everybody knows that."

"Not if you keep 'em movin' they

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don't," Pete answered. Then he leaped to his feet. He stood in front of Billy's chair, both fists extended. "Was you callin' me a liar?" he demanded. "Stand up an' fight!"

Billy smiled as he looked at the little banty-rooster of a man standing in front of him. He sort of liked the little half-pint. And besides, he remembered Nurse Hawley's warning.

"Set down, Pete," he said, nodding to a chair beside him. "I thought you was just yarnin'; but if you say it's true, I'll believe ye."

"O' course it's true!" Pete protested. "There's lots of things about sheep that'd surprise a man. Lemme tell you—"

THAT was the beginning of what looked like a friendship, and was at least a friendly tolerance on Billy's part.

He listened to Pete's stories. Almost every day Pete would spring a new one, starting off with "There's lots of things about sheep that'd surprise a man." Billy didn't believe them. Didn't believe that first one about sheep breaking through snow drifts either. But he pretended to.

By the time Pete Fuller died, three months past, Billy was ready to shed an honest tear at his funeral. And Ed Claymore, Dick Shields, and Montana Sam had concluded that Billy had completely gone over to the enemy and were frigid and distant toward him.

"Well—" Billy shrugged, thinking it over unhappily—"this'll be the test."

Men were coming down the stairs, and he could hear the clink of spurs. He fixed his face all over again. If they wished him a happy birthday, that meant that they had taken him back into that intimate little group of defiant cowboys living on a sheepman's land and on that sheepman's bounty.

If so, he would spring up joyously and go with them to Durbin. But if he was still on the outside, alone between two warring groups, he would plead rheumatism and spend his birthday alone in the deserted Home. . . .

He stiffened inwardly as they came in.

The three cowboys came first, followed by half a dozen sheepmen, and finally by Nurse Hawley. All were bundled up warmly in lined caps and sheepskin jackets, ready for the trip.

Billy watched the three old cowboys line up with their backs to the fire. Ed Claymore met his eye, and then looked away. Billy's heart sank. That, then, was his answer.

He looked over at the window. Snow was slapping against the pane with a steady hissing sound. Outside, five big busses were lined up, their tops already white. As he watched, the county snow plow rolled noiselessly by, its blades lifted, headed for the Pass where it might already be needed.

Anyhow, Billy thought, the weather would add color to his excuse. A few hours out in that storm, and his rheumatism really would be worse. He ostentatiously rubbed his hand on his knee and up and down the leg.

"Nurse," he said, "my rheumatics are a heap worse this mornin'. I don't reckon I'd better go out in this weather."

Nurse Hawley stepped toward him, full of quick concern. "Why, I'm awfully sorry, Billy! It's a shame! You old-timers look forward so to the Christmas Eve reunions in Durbin. But if you feel worse, you really shouldn't go out, and you're showing good sense in not going. I'll stay too, of course, and get your lunch."

She started taking off her coat; but Billy raised a hand. "No you don't! You go right ahead. I've cooked my own grub on campfires enough years to be able to rustle up a snack in the kitchen."

Nurse Hawley looked doubtful. "But there won't be anybody but you on the place; not a single soul."

"A bus load o' hands'll be comin' back at four to take care of the sheep," Billy said. "I won't be alone long."

The big experimental sheep ranch, with its dozens of heated barns, could run along automatically for a few hours; and it was the custom for everybody to go in to Durbin together. But in the afternoon one bus

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load of men had to come back, to check the oil in the automatic furnaces, regulate the temperature, and see that their thoroughbred charges were doing well.

Ed Claymore emitted a kind of snort. "They're waitin' for us outside," he said. "Come on, Nurse. Jones won't be lonesome. Not with ten thousand sheep all around him. He loves' em."

Billy glared. "There's lots of things about sheep," he said defensively, "that'd surprise a man."

Claymore led the march toward the door. "You c'n tell us about it when we get back," he flung over his shoulder. "I've got a date to meet some fellows in the Cattlemen's Saloon."

That last thrust struck deep. Every year it had been the custom for the four old cowboys to split a bottle in the Cattlemen's in honor of Billy's birthday. Claymore's remark emphasized the omission this year.

Billy's jaw tightened. He sat grimly in his chair as they filed out, then watched through the window as one by one the busses filled up and started off. When they were all gone, he threw off the quilt and walked over to the window.

"Happy birthday, Billy," he said hollowly, and blew his nose.

BILLY could look back on hundreds of days that he had spent alone upon the range, miles away from the nearest human. He could look back on hundreds of nights spent beside a lonely campfire, with only the barking of coyotes to keep him company.

But never in all his life had he been so lonely as he was now. When he walked about, his footsteps and the clink of his spurs echoed hollowly. When he sat down, the stillness was oppressive, broken only by the muffled sifting of snow against the windowpanes.

He clicked on the radio, and was rewarded by a roar of static through which music from the broadcasting station at the State Capitol came only faintly. It was better than silence, though, and Billy listened to it for more than an hour.

He got up and prowled around the deserted house. Going up to his room, he approached the cupboard where he kept his private bottle. A little nip wouldn't be a bad thing to cheer him up and help the hours pass.

Must be coming on noon now. A nip would serve as an appetizer for that meal he was going to have to cook for himself. . . .

Then he remembered the birthday bottle which right now he ought to be splitting with Claymore and Shields and Montana Sam in the Cattlemen's Saloon. The taste for a lonely drink left him, and he closed the cupboard with a slam.

He went down to the immaculate kitchen. A push of one finger lit the gas of the automatic range. From the refrigerator he brought bacon and eggs. He found a pot containing some left-over morning coffee and put it on another burner to warm. Soon the sputtering of bacon blended with the distant crashes of static from the living room.

When the bacon and eggs were cooked, he put them on a plate and carried it and a cup of coffee into the living room. It was cozier in by the fire, and with the radio crackling out its programs. He listened only slightly, but the racket was soothing.

Then, suddenly, he almost dropped his plate of bacon and eggs; for he had heard his own name come out of the radio!

He leaned forward to make sure. Yes, the announcer was saying it again. He cupped a hand behind an ear.

"BILLY JONES," the announcer was saying. "Calling Billy Jones at the John Armstrong Home for Aged Sheepmen and Cattlemen. We are broadcasting this special announcement as a paid emergency broadcast as telephoned to us by Mr. George Armstrong, millionaire owner of the big Armstrong Sheep Ranch.

"Bill Jones, if you are listening, this message is for you. Snowdrifts have blocked the Pass on the highway between

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Durbin and the Armstrong Ranch. The men cannot return to take care of the sheep. Mr. Armstrong asks you to visit each barn, inspect the oil tanks for the automatic furnaces, and put in more oil if necessary.

"If the Pass is not cleared before night, see that the sheep are fed. Inspect the furnaces frequently. If the sheep are allowed to get cold, numerous experiments will be ruined. Do you hear me, Billy Jones?"

Billy nodded and said, "Yes, sir"; then colored and looked quickly about him. The announcer continued:

"That is the end of the special broadcast. Now we have an item of news which may prove to be the first tragedy of the state-wide blizzard. It is probable that the school bus serving the District School of Neilson's Park is snowbound at the same Pass mentioned in the preceding announcement.

"Miss Rose Fuller, teacher of the school, left in the bus with the school children two hours ago, headed for Durbin. Though the distance from the school to Durbin is only six miles, four by side road and two after the main highway is entered at the Pass, the bus has not arrived in Durbin.

"Miss Fuller had trained her charges in the singing of Christmas carols; and they were to sing in the evening at the Durbin Christmas Eve festival.

"All telephone lines from Durbin are now down, and that city is cut off from the world. Just before the last line went out, it was reported from Durbin that the county snow plow is broken down at Sweetsprings.

"The State Highway Commission is rushing a state plow to the scene; but because of the condition of the roads, it is estimated that it will take at least ten hours to reach the spot. Whether the school children can survive ten more hours of exposure is problematical.

"Keep tuned to this station, folks, and we will interrupt our programs to broadcast later news of the stranded school bus as we receive it. We return you now to the program in progress."

Music of a swing band crowded its way through the static. Billy set his plate down on the floor and stared into the fire, his mind awhirl. A special radio message telling him to take care of the sheep. And Rose Fuller and all those children stranded in the Pass. Rose Fuller, whose father had told all those tall yarns about sheep. . . .

Billy came suddenly to his feet. That story that Pete Fuller had told. It couldn't be true. Sheep lie down and die in a snowstorm. Everybody knew that. . . .

The line of Billy's jaw tightened slowly. He spoke solemnly, almost as though he were praying. "I hope it was true, Pete. 'Cause if it was a lie, Rose an' all those kids will be dead; an' I reckon all of Mr. Armstrong's sheep will be dead too, an' he'll throw me plumb out on my ear."

He got his cap and sheepskin coat and went out toward the barns.

Almost ten thousand sheep were in those barns. Sheep carefully selected and bred so that their wool was heavier by pounds and longer by inches than that of ordinary range sheep. Sheep that reproduced with twins and triplets instead of one at a time. Sheep that were pampered and petted and cared for like babies, with their temperature always just so and their food always just so.

On the way to the barns, Billy stopped to open the door to the kennels that housed the dozen or more sheep dogs. Taking them with him, he entered the first barn, commenced turning sheep out of their special stalls.

PETE FULLER'S story had been true. Billy found that out after they had covered the mile and a half of level road and were spiraling upward toward the Pass.

A sharp wind, which bit deep into his body and made his rheumatic leg ache like a tooth, kept the level road fairly cleared of snow. But that same wind, howling around the four pinnacles which bounded the Pass, piled drifts in the path.

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Billy marveled at the way the dogs handled the sheep. As soon as they found out what was wanted, they took charge. Along the level stretch they pushed so fast that Billy had to strain to keep up. The dozen or so dogs took the sides and rear and front, keeping the sheep in a compact mass, hurrying them along.

But when the road began to rise and drifts barred the way, the dogs changed their tactics.

No orders were given. Billy didn't know enough to give an order. Even if he had known what should be done, he couldn't tell the dogs. But with no orders at all, as if by common consent, they started the sheep to milling.

Billy didn't even notice it at first. The driving snow made seeing difficult; and early darkness was coming on. But when they came to the deep drifts that barred the Pass, he saw all at once that the sheep were moving in a wide circle.

The dogs had them running now; and the steam from their hot bodies rose in a cloud above the compact moving mass.

Billy moved up to the front. Round and round the milling mass swept; and with each circling he noted that the sheep on the outer edges were being forcibly thrown into the drift.

A few feet at a time the drifts broke. Then others from behind forced the first sheep onward; and finally the thousands of tiny feet had beaten down the snow which the first sheep had broken from the drift, and the whole flock had moved forward.

Billy went waist deep into the drift, keeping ahead of the sheep, lifting those that lost their footing and shoving them back into the living stream.

The final entry into the throat of the Pass came with startling suddenness. One moment, there was a wall of snow fifteen feet high ahead of them. The next, the final thin wall collapsed and the sheep went pouring through.

THE school bus was stalled right at the mouth of the side road, its front wheels turned in the direction of Durbin. The driver and Rose Fuller and all the children were huddled in a circle in front of the bus around a cotton-waste fire fed by gasoline.

Billy stood still while the sheep and dogs swept by. Then Rose Fuller, somewhat white of face, came running over to him. She threw her arms around him.

"Billy!" she exclaimed. "You remembered what father told you!"

Billy grinned wryly. "Yeah," he drawled. "An' it turned out to be true. Surprised me some. Well, the road's clear. You-all c'n drive on down to th' Home an' stay there."

Rose Fuller's face fell. "The Home? But these children are to sing in the Christmas Eve festival! It would break their hearts to miss it now."

From the group of children around the fire Billy heard one high, shrill voice: "Look! That sheepherder is wearing spurs!"

His heart sank like a lump within him. A sheepherder. . . .

And it was true. Now Ed Claymore and Dick Shields and Montana Sam wouldn't have to stop at calling him a sheep lover. They could call him a sheepherder—and make it stick!

He shuddered at the thought of facing them in Durbin, surrounded by sheep dogs and ten thousand sheep.

"Cain't be done!" he stated firmly. "I've got to git these sheep back."

The bus driver, who had sauntered over to them, spoke up. "Don't see how you're going to do it, old-timer. Your sheep are half way through that other drift now."

Startled, Billy looked. It was true. The mass of sheep had made no pause in the Pass. With boundless energy the dogs had pushed them on.

With a cry, Billy ran into the mass, scattering sheep to either side. Pushing through to the front, he faced them, shouting at them, shoving, striving to turn them back. But the dogs pushed them on.

Finally Billy gave up. He came panting back to the group. "I can't leave 'em to go on by 'emselves," he declared despair-

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ingly. "An' I can't turn 'em. Reckon they'll have to go clean on to Durbin."

He turned to the bus driver. You got gas enough left to git you there?"

The driver nodded.

"Then when the drift is down, you drive on by. I'll be comin' in later on with the sheep."

IT WAS pretty dark by the time the town loomed up. Billy watched the gray stream of steaming sheep pour along the highway, flanked by the dogs.

There was nothing now between them and the town, no way in which they could get lost. They would pour like a living tide into Durbin; and there in Durbin would be plenty of sheepherders who would take charge of the critters.

Billy's mind raced desperately. Ahead of him was the gleaming light of the big Christmas tree. People would be gathered, packing the square, to see him arrive.

Claymore, and Shields, and Montana Sam would be there—grinning. He simply could not face it. He would slip away into the first side street.

They caught him before he had gone a block. Seized him and lifted him to their shoulders and carried him in to the square. A dozen hands shoved from behind, forcing him up the stairs to the lighted platform in front of the Christmas tree.

George Armstrong was there, and the mayor, the sheriff, and several other dignitaries.

George Armstrong shook his hand. Then he made a speech. Billy paid little or no attention to the speech. His eyes were searching the crowd down there at the foot of the platform.

Finally he found them, the three old cowboys, in a compact group near the foot of the stairs. They were grinning. Billy winced. He turned away from them, heard the last words of the millionaire sheepman's speech.

"And to top it all," George Armstrong was saying, "though Billy Jones spent all his life on the cattle ranges, though he is in truth a cowboy, he handled those sheep like a veteran sheepherder!"

Cheers followed. Billy wished that there were a hole in the platform he could sink through. A veteran sheepherder! George Armstrong had called him that! In front of all these people!

Despairingly he knew that he would never hear the end of it. That remark of George Armstrong's would stick to him like a bur. With jaw clenched and eyes cold and narrowed, he made his way down the stairs.

Somewhere over by the Christmas tree the children of the District School of Nielson's Park, led by Rose Fuller, raised their voices in a carol. The crowd was still shouting as Billy got to the ground.

IN FRONT of him, barring the way, stood Ed Claymore and Dick Shields and Montana Sam. Billy braced his feet a little apart. His face was grim as he looked toward Ed Claymore. Claymore was always the spokesman.

"Well?" Billy said, through clenched teeth. "Well, get it off your chest, Claymore. Say it."

He braced himself, waiting for that hated word *sheepherder* which would cling to him for the rest of his days. But when Ed Claymore spoke, he said something else, something surprising:

"Billy," he said, "there's lots of things about sheep that'd surprise a man. I reckon even old cowboys like you an' me an' Dick an' Sam ought to know some of 'em. They seem to come in handy."

Billy blinked and stepped back a pace. He bumped into a sheep. They were all around, flooding the square. Herders from the Armstrong ranch were pushing through the crowd, shouting to the dogs.

Ed Claymore hooked his arm into Billy's. "Come on, Billy," he said. "Let's get over among our own kind for a while, away from these pesky sheep. Dick an' Sam an' me have got a birthday bottle waitin' for you over at the Cattlemen's."

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Working together as they always did, they were the fastest peach handlers in the business—Ma, Pa, Jen, Tod, and Clara

COMPLETE NOVELET

The Horrible Hornbills

By CRAWFORD SULLIVAN

Author of "Captain Jonah," "S. S. Sesame," etc.

Compounded of gasoline and gooper feathers, here is the gayest, brawlingest, most completely winning parcel of honest lawbreakers that ever bedeviled a crooked sheriff. We give you the Family Hornbill, who have mastered peach-picking without pain

I

THEY came tooling up Highway 99 on a bright July afternoon, fenders flapping like mad and the noisy motor grinding at full speed.

The top of the car was burdened with a folded canvas tent, some camp chairs, a collapsible table, a box of pots and pans, and two bulging suitcases. A wooden tool chest rested on the rack behind the spare tire, and one running board was built up into a trough for miscellaneous luggage.

The other running board carried a wooden box with a square hole sawed in it. Through the hole peered a pink-eyed, mongrelly bulldog.

Pa Hornbill was driving, his big red hands strangling the wheel, perspiration

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beading his carroty brows. Next to him sat his eldest son, Jen. Jen Hornbill had the rugged, stony features of his father, but his expression was more like that of the bulldog.

Neither of them said much as they watched waves of heat rise from the asphalt road and saw the white line quiver like a snake.

Ma Hornbill sat in the back, arms crossed on her pillowy bosom. Tod, the smallest and reddest of the lot, snapped his slingshot against the back window. He was fourteen and had a mop of untrained hair that resembled the bristles on a sunburned porcupine.

His sister, Clara, was twenty. Her eyes were wide and bright, and she had a few freckles on her nose. Furthermore, Clara had gone to school for eleven years and had nearly gotten a diploma.

The broad flat valley stretched for miles ahead and miles on both sides. Far to the east blue mountains were visible through a haze of dust. Irrigation canals laced the lowlands like a skein of green thread, curling, branching, burrowing under the highway.

Here were vineyards, orchards, patches of plump melons. Butterflies flashed their brilliant colors by the roadside, and a few giddy bugs collided with the windshield.

"Makin' good time," observed the elder Hornbill, glancing at his Ingersoll. "Reckon we ought to reach Modesto by five."

"Reckon so," said Jen.

"Jiggers, Pa!" Tod dug his knees into the cushions and pointed at the rear window. "There's a cop followin' us."

PA HORNBILL jammed on the brakes, but the sound of a siren was already in his ears. The motorcycle patrolman pulled alongside and motioned him to the shoulder.

Climbing from his cycle, the officer regarded his victims coldly, and a pad and pencil made their appearance.

"I was only doin' twenty-five," said Pa Hornbill.

"Fifteen's the limit," said the officer. "You're in the city of Stillwater." He motioned to a group of frame buildings set back from the highway. "Where you headed?"

"Modesto."

"Fruit tramps, huh?"

"None o' your business," growled Pa Hornbill. "Gimme a ticket and shut up."

"A ticket don't mean anything to you birds," was the curt reply. "You're paying a visit to Judge Smith."

Jen opened the door. "I'll take a sock at that guy—"

"Easy, Jen," advised Ma Hornbill. "A soft answer turns away wrath."

Jen settled back in the seat, making guttural noises.

The policeman remounted his motorcycle and escorted them to a ramshackle court house which stood on a street branching off from the highway. The family filed into the building, entered a stuffy courtroom silent except for the whirring of a fan.

A little bald-headed man sat at the judge's bench reading a newspaper. He had very little chin and large popping eyes like a frog's.

"Speeders, your honor," said the officer. "Twenty-five in a fifteen-mile zone."

The judge tore off a corner of the newspaper and chewed it ruminatively. His round eyes rolled from Hornbill to Hornbill. "Speeders," he mused. "All of 'em?"

"They're all in one car," explained the officer. "Fruit tramps."

Clara swished forward irately. "You've no right to call us that!" she protested.

"I presume then that you are regularly employed in some lucrative profession?" said the judge elegantly.

"We follow the fruit," Clara told him. "Pa's a boxmaker, Jen's a lidder, Ma packs, I check, and Tod carries shook. We have work promised us in Modesto."

"Officer Jones claims you broke the law," said the judge. "If you plead not guilty I'll have to hold you for trial."

"Then there's nothin' to do but plead guilty," replied Pa Hornbill.

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"In that case I fine you ten dollars."

"Ten dollars!" exclaimed Ma Hornbill. "All the money we got in the world is nine dollars and sixty-seven cents."

"I'm a fair-minded man," said the judge, rubbing his pudgy hands together. "Give me the nine sixty-seven."

Ma Hornbill opened her cracked purse and placed a mound of change on the judge's desk. "You must need this pretty bad," she muttered. "Come on, Pa."

Grimly scornful the Hornbills marched from the court house. Gears grinding, the ancient automobile wheezed toward the highway. "I've seen that judge some place before," said Pa Hornbill thoughtfully. "Wish I could remember where."

"I should have socked him," Jen grumbled.

The town of Stillwater vanished behind a bend in the highway. "It's a long road that has no turning," said Ma. "When we get to Modesto—"

Splut . . . splut . . . splut.

The motor gave a feeble cough and stopped running. Pa Hornbill steered the car off the highway and glared at the radiator cap, a bead of sweat dripping from his ruddy nose. There was a moment of tense silence as everyone awaited his decision.

"Well," said Pa Hornbill resignedly. "We're outa gas."

ON ONE side of the highway was a railroad track, and on the other side stood a closed packing shed. The Hornbills shoved the car onto a broad clearing near the shed and started to remove their luggage.

They were unfolding the tent when a young man jumped from the shed platform and walked toward them. He was tall, with a pleasant face and dark curly hair. A revolver hung at his hip.

"Sorry, but you folks can't camp here," he said.

"Who says we can't?" retorted Pa Hornbill, his blue eyes closing to twinkly slits.

Jen thrust out his chin and doubled both fists. "Yeah, who says we can't?"

The Hornbills' bulldog bristled, baring his fangs. Tod grasped the animal by the collar and picked up a good-sized rock.

"This is my property," said the young man. He spoke coolly, quietly, obviously unimpressed by this front of defiance. "Don't force me to be unpleasant."

"You're talkin' to the toughest hombre in California," declared Jen aggressively. "I was born to accommodate guys who go lookin' for trouble. That pea shooter of yours don't scare me—"

The man's hand slid down to his side. Jen's movement was quicker, for the big red fist zipped out like a mallet, striking the stranger on the cheek. The blow landed with a smacking crunch and packed enough force to jar the head of a bull.

Clara gasped; Pa Hornbill gave a grunt of approval. The stranger's legs buckled for an instant, then straightened.

Jen cocked his fist for a second blow, but the stranger dodged to the left, and the punch went wild. Before Jen could regain his balance, a long, slender arm swished upward and something hard and powerful connected with his chin.

Jen tottered precariously; dropped limply to the dust. He pulled himself to one knee, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and found it wet with blood. "You dirty bum," he muttered. "You hit me with that gun butt!"

"I haven't touched the gun."

Jen glanced at the other Hornbills. Their faces told him that the stranger was speaking the truth. They were as bewildered as Jen.

"If you want a fight, don't be afraid of my gun," said the stranger. "It isn't loaded."

"But I seen you make a pass for it," said Jen.

"Can't a guy reach for a smoke?" The stranger drew a pack of cigarettes from his trouser pocket and offered one to Pa Hornbill, who accepted it silently.

"I can't figure it out," said Jen. "I give him my Sunday punch—"

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"You picked on the amateur champ of Stanislaus County," said the stranger. "I'm Bill Dean."

"Not old Tom Dean's son?" asked Pa Hornbill.

The young man nodded. "My father died three months ago," he said. "You knew him?"

"Worked for him many a time. We're the Hornbills."

It was Bill Dean's turn to look amazed. "Are you the ones they call—the Horrible Hornbills?"

"That's us," said Pa Hornbill proudly. "It was your old man himself that thought up the name."

"You don't look very horrible. From what I've heard—"

"Don't believe all you hear," counseled Ma. "There's good in everybody."

"I must be slippin'," murmured Jen, feeling his bruised jaw. "I hit him with everything I had."

"It's about time someone taught you a lesson," said Clara unfeelingly. "Maybe you won't be so anxious to pick a fight from now on."

BILL DEAN'S glance turned to Clara and stayed there admiringly. The girl's auburn hair and saucy mouth were enough to claim any man's attention. "Are you one of the family, too?" he asked.

"I'm the most horrible one of the bunch," she told him. "The one you just fought is my brother Genesis. This is Tod and that's our bulldog, Greenwald. Now you know all of us."

"If I'd known who you were, I wouldn't have acted this way," Dean explained. "I figured you had been sent by the Crown outfit."

"I've heard of them chiselers," said Pa. "Are they causin' you trouble?"

"They wrecked my other shed last week," said Dean. "This shed is scheduled to open tomorrow, and I'm guarding it myself. The Crown Packing Company has a Portugee manager called Big Ramon who—"

"Oho!" Jen uttered a throaty snarl. "Big Ramon is the spik that caused me that trouble in Watsonville. I been layin' for him."

"Stick around," advised Dean. "I can give you all work in my shed."

"No," said Pa. "We got a nice peaceful job waitin' for us in Modesto. If you'll let us camp here for the night and lend us four bits for gas—"

"There's a cool spot over by the canal," Dean cut in. "Perhaps after dinner Miss Hornbill would like to go for a swim?"

"I think she would," said Clara. "Especially if Mr. Dean joins her."

Ma smiled benevolently. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good," she remarked. "Wipe your nose, Tod, and fetch the tent pegs."

A string of refrigerator cars stood on the railroad spur in back of the shed, and crouched inside one of the cars was a man in blue denim, a floppy hat crushed over his head and gold rings dangling from his ear lobes. As the Hornbills walked toward the canal, he dropped from his hiding place and hotfooted it for the highway.

Very little ever escaped the keen eyes and ears of Big Ramon.

II

THE canal was bordered by a row of tall eucalyptus trees, and splotches of moonlight burnished the dark water. Pa Hornbill's mouth organ wheezed tunelessly, and Tod was some place upstream making a noise like a seal.

Clara adjusted the strap of her bathing suit; tested the water with her toe. Suddenly she saw a head staring up at her from below.

"Come on in," said the head. "The water's swell."

Clara plunged in with little regard for form and came up a few feet from Bill Dean. "Jen's watching the shed for me," he informed her. "He's been real decent since this afternoon."

"Jen's really worried," Clara confided. "He's afraid he's losing his grip or some-

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thing. Nobody's ever knocked him down before."

"And I never hit anyone that hard before in my life," said Dean. "It was only a lucky punch."

"I wish you'd tell Jen that," said Clara. "It'll make him feel better."

"He'd have plenty of chances to regain his confidence if he stuck around here," said Dean. "This trouble with Crown is serious."

"What caused it?"

"When Dad died, the Crown Packing Company tried to buy me out," Dean said. "I refused to sell, and since then they've been threatening to close me up. If they swallow the Dean firm, every other small packer will go the same way, and the local fruit growers will have to accept whatever Crown offers 'em. I'm new in the business, but I know enough not to sell out."

"Who owns the Crown Company?"

"The controlling interest is owned by a man called Charles Bridges who lives in Stillwater. I've investigated the matter carefully and found that there isn't any Charles Bridges in Stillwater."

The mouth organ stopped wheezing, and from beyond the trees came the sound of a dog barking. Clara listened for a moment, then struck out for the bank. "That's Greenwald!" she said excitedly. "Something must be wrong!"

Clambering up the bank, they saw a pale blue flame licking one end of the packing shed. Pa Hornbill rushed from the tent brandishing an ax.

Bill Dean paused to pick up his revolver and some cartridges. Several shadowy figures could be seen near the railroad siding, crawling under the freight cars. Dean crossed the track and saw three men running toward a sedan which was parked near the highway.

He fired once, but the shot went completely wild, clanging against something metallic on the side of a refrigerator car. The men jumped onto the sedan's running board, and the car roared down the road without benefit of headlights. The packing shed continued to burn.

Pa Hornbill's ax crashed against the flaming slats of the shed, ripping out timbers. Tod, dripping wet, heaved loose dirt on the fire with a shovel, while Ma lugged a large fire extinguisher from the shed platform and doused the blaze liberally.

In spite of these efforts, the fire sneaked around one side of the structure and threatened to envelope a pile of shook—lumber cut for boxmaking—that stood in the corner.

"Jen—where are you?" Clara was shouting anxiously when Bill Dean reached her side. "I can't find him any place. Do you suppose that—"

"Listen!" Dean interrupted. "Isn't that the dog howling, inside the shed?" He sprinted to the other end of the loading platform and found the office door open.

JEN HORNBILL lay on the floor with Greenwald sounding off over him. The animal snapped at Dean's bare ankles angrily when he attempted to drag the unconscious man outside. An ugly gash decorated Jen's forehead, but he was still breathing.

Spotting a length of garden hose on the floor, Dean connected it to an inside faucet and turned a spray of water over the pile of shook. The flames hissed protestingly and dissolved into thick black smoke.

Ma Hornbill's fire extinguisher snorted, Tod's shovel dished out a flurry of sand, and Pa whirled his ax savagely. The blaze had enough, and gave up the unequal fight.

When the coals were sufficiently soaked, Bill Dean returned to the platform, where he found Jen sitting with his head in his hands. Clara had one arm around Jen's shoulder sympathetically; and the dog, Greenwald, seemed to sense the gravity of the occasion for his pink eyes were sober, his stumpy tail inanimate.

"I'm washed up," sighed Jen. "I couldn't fight a cream puff. Ever since Dean socked me this afternoon—I ain't been the same."

"It's only your imagination," said Clara.

"No." Jen wagged his head slowly. "Remember the time in Calipatria when the Hindu beaned me with a flatiron? I took

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the heathen apart and made him eat two yards of his turban. Remember when the Dossy boys came after me with baseball bats?"

"Maybe this was just an off day," Dean suggested.

"I got no zits any more, that's all," said Jen dismally. "I'm a has-been."

"Did you see who hit you?" Clara asked.

"It was that rat, Big Ramon," said Jen. "I couldn't make out the other two."

"They dumped coal oil over one end of the shed and set it afire," said Dean. "Someone else was in the car, ready to make a getaway. That shows you what kind of an outfit I'm up against."

Pa sauntered toward them, his ax slung jauntily over his shoulder. "Haven't had such a good workout since I was a fireman in Kansas City," he said. "There was a sixty-story building caught on fire and I—"

"Pa!" Clara jumped gracefully from the platform. The moon tossed highlights into her glossy hair, and the damp bathing suit glistened with a satiny sheen. "Pa—can't we stay here and work for Mr. Dean? He needs help."

"Well," said Pa. "I suppose we might stay on a little while—till we earn gas money."

"That's great," said Bill Dean. He grasped Pa Hornbill's hand warmly; but he was looking at Clara.

THE trucks came in at five that morning, loaded with lugs of peaches. At six the boxmakers were clattering away at their benches, the packers were in their stalls, and the fruit tumbled onto the canvas belt like a wave of red gold.

Within an hour Bill Dean knew why many of the packing profession regarded the Hornbills as horrible.

At his boxmaking bench Pa Hornbill worked with a lightning hammer, slapping a box together before the other boxmakers could nail up a side. A wide bandanna around her neck, Ma shuttled peaches into the crates so rapidly that her hands were a fuzzy blur. Her face was quite placid.

Jen rapped the lids down with automatic precision, smoking a cigarette until it burned his lips, then rolling another with his left hand. Tod was kept busy hustling bundles of shook for his father, and Clara checked the boxes as they were trundled onto the refrigerator cars.

Since packing sheds pay off at so much per box, the Hornbills were always prepared to collect the lion's share of the profits. No one could keep up with them, and few attempted.

It is rumored that a boxmaker in Turlock once hammered nail for nail with Pa Hornbill for a period of thirteen hours —afterward committing suicide in an adjoining canal. Whether it was something in their physical or chemical makeup that made the Hornbills function at tornado speed, no one knew. It was certainly not the desire for money, since they were always happily broke.

III

FOR three days the peaches kept rolling onto the belt, the Hornbills kept packing, and Bill Dean kept counting up his profits. On the fourth day something went wrong.

In the afternoon Jim Gadsby, a truck driver, returned to the shed without his truck. "A guy in a big Diesel ran me off the road," he told Dean. "Then two other guys jumped out and heaved all my fruit into the ditch."

Dean complained to the Stillwater police. The next day two more loads of fruit were similarly destroyed. Dean complained again, and the next day no fruit reached the shed at all.

Seated in a camp chair in front of the Hornbill tent, Dean stared at the ground gloomily. "It looks as if Crown's got me licked," he admitted. "They've been wrecking trucks, dumping fruit, and the cops won't do anything about it. All I get is a promise to investigate."

"When I was in the army," mused Pa Hornbill, "General Pershing told me that

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the only way to fight a enemy is with strategy. Strategy." He held the word on his tongue fondly.

"Very true," agreed Ma. "You got to fight fire with fire. Like we did during that lettuce strike in Salinas."

"Eggsactly!" Pa beamed. He pondered for a moment, then said, "Where do you pick up the next load of peaches?"

"At the Barnes ranch," said Dean. "It's eight miles down the road—near the Crown shed."

"That makes it fine," said Pa. "You be back here at dawn. We'll take the trucks out ourselves."

"But you're liable to—"

"We're liable to bring back some peaches," said Pa.

"The folks know what they're doing," Clara said reassuringly. "They've been in these fruit wars before."

. . . Shortly after dawn the Hornbills gathered by three battered trucks which stood near the loading platform—all that were left of a fleet of six.

Two of the trucks were standard fruit carriers; the third was a small dump job built to haul sand.

"We'll go in single file, like a parade," said Pa. "Jen and Ma can ride in the first truck, Dean and Clara in the second. Me and Tod will bring up the rear in the little machine."

"But we have to pass the Crown shed on the way," Dean reminded him. "Big Ramon and his gang will be certain to spot us if we all travel together."

"There's safety in numbers," said Ma readily.

"You know what happened to my other trucks," Dean said. "I'm afraid somebody's going to get hurt."

"Shouldn't be surprised," Pa nodded gravely.

BEFORE the trucks had gone half a mile, a black sedan pulled out of a side road, trailing behind slowly. The car stayed in the rear until it reached the Crown packing shed, then swerved off the highway.

"Big Ramon was in that car," said Pa Hornbill, when they had reached the Barnes ranch. "I've a hunch he'll be plannin' a reception for us on the way back."

As the peach lugs were loaded onto the big trucks, Dean noticed that Tod and Pa Hornbill were filling the small one with culls—some of the fruit that was smashed and rotten. "What's the idea?" he asked.

"Ma likes to cook up peach jam," said the senior Hornbill. "Ain't nothing better than culls for peach jam." He scooped up a shovelful of damaged fruit and slopped it into the truck.

Fully loaded, the trucks rumbled away from the ranch and back toward Stillwater. "If I didn't have great respect for your family, I'd think they were slightly bats," said Dean, swinging his machine onto the highway.

"Keep as close to Jen as you can," advised Clara. "There's a Crown truck behind us already."

Rolling at a fast clip, they approached the Crown shed again. The black sedan was parked in front, and in it sat a swarthy man with gold earrings.

Pa Hornbill slowed down for an instant and shouted something at Tod, who was squatted on the heap of culls. Cradling a stone in his slingshot, Tod let it fly at Big Ramon's windshield. The windshield cracked into a five-pointed star, and Big Ramon leaped from the car wrathfully.

"After 'em!" he bawled. "Poosh 'em off the road!"

Two more Crown trucks roared into action, thundering away from the shed like vengeful juggernauts. The drivers had evidently been ready and waiting.

Bill Dean watched his speedometer twirl up to forty-seven, while his truck shivered and pounded. "If we go much faster, we'll all land in the ditch," he said between clenched teeth.

"Hang close to Jen," urged Clara. "We're almost—"

The high whine of a siren sounded from behind. Dean glanced in the mirror. "Cop," he grunted.

Creeping up on the procession, the po-

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lice officer sat stiffly resplendent on his shiny white motorcycle. The motorcycle drew closer, and Tod Hornbill stared sharply over the back of the small truck. "Pa!" he called. "It's the same bottle who hauled us in at Stillwater."

"How's your aim, son?"

TOD selected the softest peach he could find; measured the distance carefully. The result was a masterwork of marksmanship. The peach struck the officer directly between the eyes.

Skidding off to the left, the motorcycle deposited its rider in a bush of wild raspberries and then wrapped itself neatly around a road marker.

Bill Dean saw the crackup in his rear view mirror. His speedometer was above fifty, and the rear end of his truck fishtailed dangerously.

The Crown trucks inched up slowly, hugging the left side of the road. A horizontal bar extending the entire length of the chassis swung up from the right side of each truck.

"So that's how they've managed to shove my trucks off the road," muttered Dean. "They've got side bumpers."

The leading Crown truck nosed forward, jockeying to come alongside Pa Hornbill, who straddled the white line stubbornly. Tod scrambled onto the seat beside his father. The Crown truck dropped back several yards; its driver then pushed the throttle to the floor, intending to boost Pa's vehicle out of control with one powerful nudge. Ahead lay a sparkling green canal, spanned by a wooden bridge.

"How's about it, Pa?" inquired Tod.

"Okay, son."

Tod jerked a lever, and the back end of Pa Hornbill's truck angled up like a drawbridge, dumping its entire load of fruit onto the highway.

A normal, healthy peach could hardly be called an agent of destruction. When reaching a period of senile decay, however, the fruit develops an oleaginous quality more potent as a lubricant than the inner side of a banana peel.

The leading Crown truck skidded in a half circle, sideswiping the truck behind. The third truck ploughed between the other two, prying them apart and sending them through opposite rails of the bridge.

It then zig-zagged down the road about thirty feet, uprooted a telephone pole, and tore a furrow through a cornfield.

Pa Hornbill put on the brakes and glanced back. Bruised but apparently uninjured, the drivers clung to the two trucks which were half-submerged in the canal. The other driver stood in the cornfield, cursing heartily.

"Looks like Crown is gonna have to buy some more trucks," said Pa. "Too bad, ain't it?"

"Yeah," said Tod, snapping his slingshot casually. "It's too bad."

ALL day Bill Dean's trucks traveled the highway unmolested, and a continuous flood of fruit surged down the canvas belt.

At midnight the shed was still operating at full tilt, hammers rattling, hand trucks clunking across the floor. Dean sat in the office pondering over accounts. Looking up, he saw a whiskery man in a broad-brimmed Stetson.

"Hello, Sheriff," he said affably.

"The Crown Packing Company has accused you of wrecking its trucks," the sheriff told him bluntly. "I'm here to—"

"I know what you're here for," Dean cut in. "You cops seem to forget that Crown has been busting up my trucks for the past week. When I asked for help, you managed to look the other way."

"This isn't my doing," grumbled the sheriff. "I was told to serve a paper."

"Summons, eh?" said Dean. 'Well, give it to me."

'It's an injunction," said the sheriff. "You'll have to close your shed until the trial."

"What?" Dean was staggered. "Who issued an injunction?"

"Judge Smith."

Dean scowled at the pink slip of paper, stalked out of the office and stopped the

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canvas belt. "You can all go home now," he announced wearily.

Clara hurried toward him. "But we've got one more car to finish," she protested. "It has to go out tonight!"

Dean shrugged his shoulders. "The court's slapped an injunction against me," he replied. "I have to close down."

The other Hornbills huddled around. "Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doin'," said Ma rhetorically. "Tell the cop you'll close down; but we'll stay here and finish loading."

Pa nodded. "The five of us can do it. You go home, so the cop won't suspect nothing, and leave the rest to us."

"I'll come back later," suggested Dean.

"No," said Pa. "The conjunction was issued against *you*. If you ain't here, that puts us all in the clear—see? Us legal men call it *Epsom Facto*."

"All right," Dean said. "You get that car loaded, and I'll see Judge Smith first thing in the morning."

"Judge Smith?" said Clara. "He's the one who fined us for speeding."

Dean snorted, "The old goat. He wouldn't be in office, except that both of his opponents died before the election."

Turning out the lights, he locked the shed and gave Pa Hornbill the keys. Clara accompanied him to his car. Locusts twanged from the trees by the canal; the moon hung low over the railroad water tower.

"I'd have been sunk without your family," Dean admitted. "They're all swell—and especially you."

She laughed at that. "We're nothing but gypsies. That's a polite word for tramp. We work hard and have lots of excitement, but you can't expect much breeding from people who live on the highways."

"You're as well bred as anybody in Stillwater," he protested. "Fact is, most everyone in town started in the fruit sheds. They just managed to settle down."

"My family won't ever settle down. Their blood's too full of gasoline and gooper feathers."

"How about you?" He looked at her quizzically.

"I've never found any good reason to settle down."

"I can give you one."

"What is it?"

He leaned over, kissed her on the lips. It was an unsettling experience, unlike anything he had ever known: turned him hot and cold and left him shaky. Clara's eyes were luminous. She sighed faintly, raised her lips again.

"Get movin', you lunk! We got work to do!" Tod's raucous voice crackled from the shed platform unfeelingly.

A fixed, almost idiotic smile was carved on Bill Dean's face as he drove into Stillwater. He was convinced that the Hornbills were wonderful people.

IV

WHEN they were certain that the sheriff had gone, the Hornbills returned to the shed. "Something ought to be done about that Crown outfit," muttered Pa.

Ma nodded, a flurry of fuzz arising as her hands whisked peaches into a box. "It's Jen I'm worried about," she confided. "That boy broods."

"I noticed it too," said Pa. "He's got no more gumption than a pussy cat."

"Mr. Dean says it's an inferiority complex," Ma told him. "Getting beat up twice in one day has broke his morale."

"His morale, eh?" said Pa knowingly. "That's bad!"

"According to Mr. Dean, he's got inhibitions too. It's all because he wasn't able to stand up to that Portugee—"

"Up weeth the 'ands, pleeze!"

The Hornbills looked across the packing shed and saw Big Ramon standing there, an automatic pistol in his hand and two husky truck drivers behind him.

The truck drivers wore bandages of various descriptions, but seemed perfectly whole of limb. One had a set of brass knuckle dusters; the other carried a long two-by-four.

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"So we meet again, friend Hornbills," said Big Ramon, baring his white teeth. "I bring weeth me two of the unfortunates who was run into the canal thees morning—Felipe and Gus."

"I've an idea they're the ones who helped him set fire to the shed," said Pa, addressing nobody in particular.

"*Si,*" the Portugee nodded. "That was very fonny. I sneak up on my old pal Jen and bop heem weeth a pipe wrench. I think he think I bop heem weeth my fist. Ha! Ha!"

Jen Hornbill had a peculiar atrabilious look. He was not amused.

"Tonight we shall make no bungles," continued Big Ramon, adopting a sterner tone. "Pleeze, Hornbills, enter politely the refrigerating car."

They obeyed sullenly, Big Ramon's gun levelled at their back. Tod entered the car last, and the Portugee helped him along with a swift boot to the trousers.

"For busting my windshield!" explained Big Ramon, with a snarl. Felipe and Gus slid the heavy door shut and snapped the lock.

"Clara!" called Ma Hornbill, groping through the darkness. There was no reply. Greenwald had entered the car with them and was snuffling around the peach crates. "That's funny," said Ma huskily. "Where's Clara?"

"I don't remember seein' her," said Pa. "Guess she ain't here!"

AS A matter of fact, Clara at that moment was in the shed, standing behind a towering stack of shook. When Big Ramon made his sudden entrance, the girl had dropped under the canvas belt unnoticed.

When the car door rumbled shut, she darted for the tipsy-looking heap of box lids and waited for what might happen next.

"Better to douse the lights," Big Ramon said. The shed became dark, and Clara heard footsteps coming toward her.

All three of the men were standing on the other side of the shook pile. "Thees time we don't fail," the Portugee said. "Pour gasoline all over the floor, and *foof—*"

Clara pressed against the stack of irregularly balanced bundles, felt it totter. Bracing her legs, she pushed with all her strength.

The tower of wooden sheaves went over like a felled tree, burying the three men under a crunching avalanche of Oregon pine.

Clara leaped over the debris, sprinted onto the shed platform and smacked against a dark figure which was standing by the weighing scales. Both of them went over in different directions; and when Clara shook the spots away from her eyes, she heard an automobile door slam shut and saw a black sedan careening down the road. The man she had bumped into was gone.

Her brain in a whirl, she raced down the highway in the direction of Stillwater.

It was nearly an hour later when she reached Bill Dean's bungalow on the other side of town. Dean came to the door in his pajamas, still half asleep. "Ramon's trying to burn the shed again!" she panted. "They've locked the folks in a refrigerator car."

"Huh?" Dean blinked astonishedly. "Good Lord! Be with you in a minute." He dived into the bedroom and re-appeared in trousers and a sweat shirt. Before Clara could catch her breath, she was hustled into Dean's roadster.

The shed lights were burning brightly as they drove up. Dean climbed to the loading platform, revolver in hand. The bundles of shook still lay where they had fallen, but Big Ramon and his companions were nowhere in sight.

"I tipped that pile of wood on them," Clara explained. "It must have stunned them for a few minutes."

"If that woodpile hit 'em, they were more than stunned," remarked Dean.

"We've got to get the folks out of that refrigerator car," said Clara. "They'll be chilled to the bone."

"I'll have to break the lock—"

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"Bill!" Clara pointed across the shed, her eyes dilated with horror.

The refrigerator car had disappeared.

"IT'S three o'clock," said Dean, glancing at his wristwatch. "The car was picked up by the two-fifteen train."

"What'll we do?" asked Clara. "Where was the shipment bound?"

"For New York."

"But my family can't go to New York in a refrigerator car!" she exclaimed. "They'll freeze to death!"

"The valley train is a fast freight," said Dean. "Our only chance is to beat it to Oakland and have the car opened before it starts east."

Three hours later Dean and Clara reached the Oakland freight yards. "We're looking for a refrigerator car that was brought up here this morning on the valley freight," Dean told the agent. "It's a matter of life and death."

"Do you know its number?" asked the agent.

"No," replied Dean. "It came from the Dean fruit shed near Stillwater."

"I'll have to telegraph Stillwater for its number," said the agent.

Forty-five minutes later the agent leaned out from his cubbyhole in the freight office. "The number is 671046. According to schedule the car is part of an eastbound fruit shipment due to leave in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes!" Clara repeated. "Please hurry. You'll have to open the car at once."

"Open it?" The freight agent looked at them goggle-eyed. "I can't open a sealed car without orders from the main office. That'll take at least two days—"

"Listen, you fathead!" Dean grasped the man by the lapel. "There are four people locked in that car. If you don't get them out, I'll smack you so hard that—"

"I'll—open it!" the agent said hastily. "But it's against the rules."

They found car 671046 snuggled among a string of other refrigerator cars which were coupled to a snorting engine. The agent clicked the lock open, and Dean helped him shove back the door.

The engine chuffed mightily; the cars clanked and commenced to move. Clara clambered into the car's gloomy interior. "Ma!" she cried. "Come out—quick!"

Bill Dean stared at the shivering creatures who sat forlornly on the peach crates. Clara made a shrill staccato noise as her eyes rested on the bluish features of Big Ramon, Felipe and Gus.

THEY started back to Stillwater before Big Ramon and his companions had a chance to thaw out, receiving only bleak looks of hate for their efforts.

"I can't understand it," said Clara. "I saw them put the folks into the car and lock the door. Where could my family possibly be?"

"Can't tell," answered Dean. "Those rats were too obstinate to talk."

Reaching the packing shed, they saw Ma Hornbill preparing lunch on a table in front of the tent. Pa Hornbill was asleep under the eucalyptus trees with a newspaper over his face.

"Where have you been, child?" asked Ma placidly. "We were sort of worried."

"*You* were worried?" Clara slumped into a camp chair.

Dean ran his hand across his forehead. "How did you get out of the freight car?"

"The lock was broken on the other door," said Ma. "I think Mr. Dean must've shot it off when he was firin' his gun that night. All we did was go in one side and climb out the other."

"That's right," said Pa. "We found the Portugee and his pals lyin' under a pile of shook, so we dragged them into the car and wired the door shut. You can notify the railroad to let 'em out when they've cooled off."

"They're already out," said Dean. "After Clara pushed the box lids over on them, she ran out of the shed and bumped into someone who was waiting by the scales. That person is possibly the brains behind the Crown gang. If I could find out who he is—"

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"By the scales, you say?" Pa Hornbill reached into his shirt pocket. "After we got out of the car, I found these right near the scales."

He produced three cubes about a quarter the size of a die. They were made of paper, neatly pressed and moulded.

"Those things, whatever they are, don't help me any," said Dean. "If I'm going to beat the Crown Packing Company—"

"You better tell him, Pa," Ma Hornbill interrupted.

Pa cleared his throat. "You don't have to worry about Crown any more," he said. "Their main packing shed burned to the ground last night. We saw it happen."

"Pa—" Clara narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You shouldn't have done it!"

"We just happened to see the fire," Ma reiterated.

"That won't hurt Crown any," said Dean. "They've got three sheds."

"Queer thing," said Pa Hornbill. "All three of 'em burned."

Greenwald's clear, loud bark resounded from the canal, and Tod scurried toward them, the dog frisking at his heels. "Jiggers!" called Tod excitedly. "I seen the cops! They're after us for—"

"Tod!" snapped Pa Hornbill. "We got nothin' to be afraid of." He paled slightly as he saw a police car swing off the highway and squeal up beside the tent. The sheriff was driving, and with him was the motorcycle officer, without his motorcycle. Both looked very businesslike.

"You're under arrest," said the sheriff. "Climb in."

"Listen, Sheriff," said Dean earnestly. "You needn't arrest these people. I'll vouch for them personally."

"That'll be a big help," said the sheriff. "You're under arrest too. Climb in—all of you!"

V

THAT afternoon the prisoners were ushered into Judge Smith's courtroom for a preliminary hearing. It was a scorching day, and the courtroom was unoccupied except for a perspiring clerk and the sheriff, who guarded the door somberly.

A few moments later Big Ramon and his two confederates entered, casting black looks at the Hornbills. They sat on the opposite side of the room, mumbling among themselves.

Judge Smith emerged from a back room and took his place on the bench.

"I see we meet again," he said, eyeing the Hornbills dourly. "This time you are charged with arson, attempted murder, wilful destruction of three trucks, reckless driving, speeding, dumping rubbish on a public thoroughfare and assaulting an officer of the law."

"I can explain, your honor," said Dean, rising to his feet. "The charges are directed against the wrong people. The real criminals sit over there." He pointed to Big Ramon.

"He tells a lie, judge," scowled Big Ramon. "We 'ave proof absolutely—"

Tod Hornbill had been squirming restlessly, his grubby hand folded about a small pebble. He took the slingshot from his pocket, drew a careful bead and snapped it.

Big Ramon leaped about five feet, a round red mark taking shape under his ear. "That brat!" he bellowed. "I keel heem!"

As he grabbed Tod by the scruff of the neck, Ma Hornbill reached up and placed both her forefingers in the metal rings which dangled from the Portugee's ears. A sharp yank brought Big Ramon to his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Gus and Felipe rushed to the Portugee's aid immediately, Judge Smith hammered for order, and the clerk crouched behind his desk fearfully. The sheriff reached for his gun, fumbling vainly to unfasten the flap on his holster.

BILL DEAN reached the sheriff before he could get in a position to shoot anybody. A right cross to the jaw sent the man staggering. Dean hit him again for good measure, and the sheriff keeled over rigidly, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

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Tod kicked at Gus and Felipe as they tried to pull Ma off the Portugee, Clara screamed, and Pa stood with his eyes fixed on Judge Smith.

It was Jen who seemed most affected by the fracas. A volcano of emotion seemed to be seething within him. His melancholy face assumed a maniacal smile and his fists doubled into brown gristly lumps.

With one piledriving blow Jen smacked Gus into complete oblivion. Heeling around, he sailed into Felipe, removing two of the man's pre-molars with a powerful swipe.

Crawling under a table on his hands and knees, the court clerk made a sudden break for the door. It was a rash move, for Jen picked him up bodily and heaved him headfirst into the jury box.

Jen thumped both fists against his chest and a thrilling, triumphant yell burst from his throat. The effect was awe-inspiring, and Bill Dean somehow expected to see him start swinging from the light fixtures. Instead, Jen snatched up a chair and prepared to demolish it on Big Ramon's skull.

"Jen!" Clara grasped his arm frantically.

"Let him go, daughter," said Ma Hornbill indulgently. "He's workin' off his inhibitions."

The chair swished down, but Big Ramon managed to snake under the row of seats and took the blow on a padded section of his anatomy. Jen discarded the weapon, leaped into the next aisle and secured a firm grip on the Portugee's throat.

Judge Smith gaped in froggy consternation. "I demand that you cease this violence!" he sputtered. "I'll fine you for contempt of court!"

"Better do like the judge says," advised Pa. "Let the Portugee go."

Jen arose reluctantly. "I've been layin' for that guy," he protested. "Let me sock him once!"

Pa Hornbill shook his head sternly. "I'm sorry this ruckus happened, Judge," he said. "Bein' an old legal man myself, I know how you must feel."

"You'll be punished severely for this," said the judge, glowering. All of you."

"Maybe."

PA WENT over to the judge's bench and picked up a small white object which was by the water pitcher.

"I been watchin' you chew up that paper and squish it into little cubes," he said. "They're just like the ones I found at the shed last night. I wondered where I'd seen 'em before—just like I wondered where I'd seen *you* before."

"What are you driving at?"

"I used to know you when you were workin' in the fruit down in Imperial," said Pa Hornbill. "Forty years ago. You was always chewin' up paper and makin' it into little cubes with your teeth. You wasn't a judge then. Your name wasn't even Smith. I remember we used to call you Spitball Charley Bridges."

"Bridges!" said Bill Dean hastily. "Charles Bridges is owner of the Crown Packing Company!"

"Guess he and the judge are the same man then," declared Pa.

The judge gulped a glass of water, his hand jittery. "I'm Charley Bridges, all right," he admitted. "I changed my name thirty years ago. Maybe I was a little rough on Dean.

"Here's a proposition: I'm willing to let you all off scot free—providing you promise not to say a word about my owning the Crown Company."

"You won't interfere with my shed again?" asked Dean.

"No. I'll sell out all my interest in Crown. You can buy what's left of the firm for half price."

"And what'll you do?" Dean countered.

The judge rubbed his hands unctuously. "I'm running for the Superior Court in November," he stated. "You understand my position—"

"If we promise not to expose you, you'll dismiss all charges against us?" said Clara.

"Every one."

"We promise then," she said. "Our lips are sealed."

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IT WAS early September, the beginning of the grape season, when the Hornbills came jaunting toward Modesto, the roof of their car piled high with camping equipment and a pink-eyed bulldog staring from a kennel on the running board.

"I feel terrible—leavin' Clara behind," said Ma Hornbill.

"A girl has to get married sometime," said Pa. "We raised her right and got her a good husband. We got no regrets."

"Yes we have," said Ma. "It wasn't right for us to keep still about Judge Smith. He's a crooked old man."

"We made a promise not to talk," said Pa. "We have to keep it."

They stopped at Turlock for water, and Pa picked up an afternoon newspaper. "Hey, look!" he exclaimed. "It says that Judge Smith has been accused of usin' his office to further the interest of the Crown Packing Company, a firm which he himself owned. The accusation was made by Ramon Valdes, Judge Smith's alleged accomplice."

"That's Big Ramon," said Ma Hornbill. "Wonder why he squealed?"

"Lissen." Pa started to read aloud. " 'Valdes, bloody an' battered, was brought to police headquarters by a man known as Genesis Hornbill. Hornbill admitted extracting the confession an' was released by police—"

Jen Hornbill gazed at the ground sheepishly. "I had to sock that guy once before I left," he said. "When I did it, I figured I might as well make him confess. But I didn't break any promise. *I* didn't talk!"

"It looks like Jen's finally got back his morale," said Ma proudly. As they started out again, Tod snapped his slingshot, picking a bluejay off a fence rail. Ma crossed her hands on her bosom and smiled.

"All's well that ends well," she declared. "Guess there's some truth in the old sayings after all."

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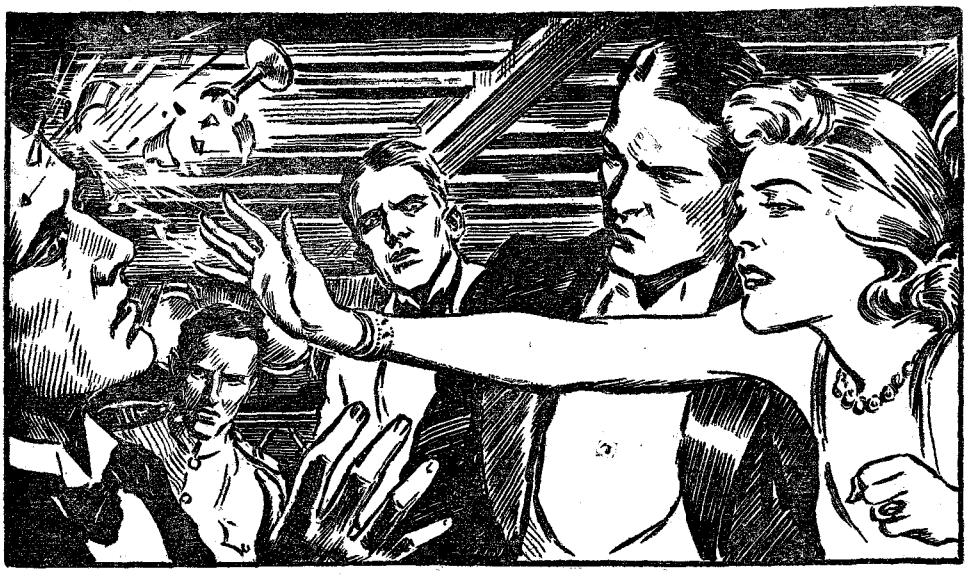

With a little sobbing moan, Vicky threw her gold-encrusted glass square at Buck Bosworth's face

Loot Lies Deep

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

AS SURE as my name's Bat Mason, I knew from the first that there was a bad smell about the cruise for sunken treasure organized by Grace Taver, the society impresario. But my managing editor said, "You know boats; you cover it." So I went along—and my neck was way out.

There was money in the thing—money, and poison. Hoke Scanlon, a plenty bad egg who'd served a term for second-degree murder, had been taken on as captain of Mrs. Taver's ketch *Condor,* on which we sailed. He was supposed to be guiding us to four million dollars in gold that had been sunk off the coast of Venezuela in a hurricane.

Arthur Hislop, who had put Scanlon in touch with Mrs. Taver, was a night club heel who lived handsomely on pickups from friends; he was along because he needed a share of that gold pretty badly. And Vicky Seymour, another Fifty-second Street flower—slightly wilted—was carrying the torch for Hislop on this trip; had, in fact, put up his share of the investment.

JUST two of that gilded group of society sailors seemed on the up and up. Buck Bosworth, millionaire, sportsman, and heavy drinker, knew I had something on Scanlon; I was pretty close to trusting Buck. And then Linda Haywood—

Linda was the season's number one glamour debutante—and a honey. I'd already started falling for her when—

Timmons, the ship's radio man, went overboard mysteriously, leaving behind a trail of blood and a wrecked wireless outfit. Because he'd been hired by Buck Bosworth instead of by Scanlon, and because I knew what kind of an egg Scanlon was, I suspected murder for some kind of a coverup—but I couldn't prove a thing.

And what was worrying me most, just then, was Linda. A girl who'd been pampered all her life, made love to by everybody from Yale freshmen to moneyed old goats, she found Scanlon a decidedly new experience—and liked him. I tried to warn her about him one night as we sat on deck, but succeeded only in making her angry. And at that moment I discovered that Garside, the mate, had been eavesdropping.

THAT night a man came into my cabin and tried to kill me. Warned by some sixth sense, I had slipped out of my bunk; grappled with him in the blackness of the cabin. After a terrific struggle in which he nearly did for me, he escaped, leaving a very

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businesslike knife with which he had slashed at my sheets. When I dashed into the passageway after him, Hislop met me, accused me of being drunk.

Captain Hoke Scanlon challenged me with the same accusation next day. I got sore then: told him about the attempt on my life, and warned him that if it happened again—and succeeded—my ghost would talk—about *him*—through a letter I was hiding on the ship. He responded with a veiled threat to sink the ship.

Again that night there was an attempt on my life—and again the unknown assailant got away. Next morning the captain changed my cabin, in a move to search for the telltale letter I'd hidden. But I was just a minute too fast for him; managed to get the letter out and hide it under the bunk of my new cabin. . . .

CHAPTER XII

AVENGING GHOST

BUT tension really started to build up aboard the *Condor* when we approached the spot marked with a cross on the chart.

According to Hoke Scanlon's story the *Ulvik* had been struck by the hurricane when she was thirty or forty miles north of that archipelago of cays known as Las Roques, off the north coast of Venezuela.

The storm itself had been moving in a westerly direction. The *Ulvik*, being directly in the forward path of the disturbance, had of course been smitten by screaming winds from the north. Soon after the hurricane hit her, her forward hatch cover and her bridge had been washed away.

Drifting rapidly southward, her emergency wheel washed from her afterdeck, she had fallen into the trough of the sea and had foundered on the reefs of Los Roques.

She had almost—but not quite—missed the western end of this system of reefs and small islands, the largest of which, Cayo Grande, was only seven miles in length. She had apparently ripped herself wide open when she struck, but the immense hurricane seas had washed her over the shallow reef, whereupon she had sunk in deep water beyond.

It wouldn't have been hard for Scanlon to miss the entire cluster of cays which spread over only twenty-four miles from east to west and thirteen miles north to south. And they are all low except one, El Roque, whose limestone hills can be seen in clear weather from a dozen miles at sea.

As much as I had cruised around the Caribbean I had never seen these reefs and islands, for there is nothing about them which would justify the risk of being set ashore by the currents. They are unpredictable, these currents. Their velocity often, and without warning, changes quickly from three-fourths of a knot to three knots, and there is no known way of predicting such a change.

They are very good waters to keep well away from.

That last day Hoke Scanlon and his saturnine mate, Garside, practically lived on deck with their sextants and during the night the captain astonished me by asking me to get a star sight to see how closely our fixes checked.

Mine checked with his, all right, but differed by nine miles from that of Garside. And all the thanks I got for my trouble was a nasty glare from Garside, who seemed insulted because my sight matched with Scanlon's instead of with his.

I did not like Garside, anyway. My back hair lifted every time he came near. He hadn't done a thing to me—except to snoop around that time when Linda and I had been together on deck. But somehow I felt more at ease with Hoke Scanlon, whom I knew to be a low-life, than with Garside, about whom I knew nothing at all.

The feeling that we were almost at our destination hung over the entire ship. Half the *Condor's* crew became volunteer assistants to the bow lookout. They stood in a clotted group up there, all straining their eyes to catch the first white blink of Los Roques Light.

IT IS queer how an atmosphere of tension can pervade a ship, spreading through every deck and station. Grace

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Taver broke out a case of Moët et Chandon, '28 vintage. And it seemed that champagne always hit Buck Bosworth pretty hard. This wasn't so good, because when Buck Bosworth got drunk he got ugly.

I had known that about Buck ever since the first time I had seen him. That had been at the Clearwater Yacht Club, during the Midwinter Snipe Championships. He had been in a fair way to cleaning out the bar when Bill Rehbaum had put him to sleep with one of the sweetest rabbit punches it had ever been my pleasure to witness. He could take three or four in a row, but after those something went zowie inside him and he was up like a skyrocket.

I had been on deck getting another star sight; and when I went down again, Buck's face was as white as a tablecloth and his eyes seemed to be a good deal out of focus.

"So you don't think I can take any more?" he was asking Art Hislop, who had apparently been giving him the ah-ah.

"Not and still have any luck pretending you're a gentleman," said Art Hislop.

"Cut it, Hislop," I said, knowing Buck.

"Bat," Buck said, choosing his words with care, "unless you want to hear me tell the truth about this gigolo, here, you'd better go back to work on your log, or something."

After all, I wasn't hired on this cruise to be Bosworth's dry nurse. And I did want to hear the truth about Hislop. So I leaned against the bulkhead and waited.

Linda was sitting very quiet, watching Buck with a sultry stare. Grace Taver was as uneasy as a hen on a hot china egg. Vicky Seymour was almost as pale as Buck. Her dark eyes were so expanded you could see the whites all around.

"Vicky won't like what I'm going to say," said Buck with drunken gravity, "but it'll be good for her soul. And her pocketbook, too."

"I don't want to hear it," Vicky whispered.

"Art," Buck went on, implacably, "I don't like you. I don't like the way you fix your hair, nor the way you knot your ties. I've watched you for two-three years and I've never yet seen you pick up a check.

"I don't like the way you're always trying to make a nice, quiet pass at Linda when you're just as much on Vicky's payroll as any of those pretty escort boys whose racket was busted up in New York. I don't like the way you sneak up on deck to have a confidential little talk with Captain Scanlon when you think everybody is in bed. I think you've dealt us a cold deck and—"

All this time Hislop's eyes had been getting smaller and smaller, his mouth thinner and thinner, until he looked as if he had no lips at all. At first I had been watching him idly, a little amused as Buck turned on the heat.

Now, however, I was all attention, for I had suddenly discovered that this man, this hanger-on in society, could be dangerous. Into his face had come, in the space of half a dozen heart-beats, a look which you see only a few times in your life, and when you see it, if you are wise, you won't forget it.

Unconsciously I stepped forward as his body grew tight, every line of it, like that of a sprinter crouched at the mark, awaiting the gun.

But I didn't have to do anything. Vicky did it. She gave a little sobbing moan, picked up her gold-encrusted water glass and flung it full at Buck's face. He saw it coming, pulled away from it; but the thing struck him on the forehead, leaving a quick flow of blood to mark the spot where it had splintered into a hundred sparkling slivers.

I looked at Art Hislop. Some of the tautness had gone out of him. Some, but not all.

Then, just to play safe, I moved in on Buck.

"Say good night to the ladies, Buck," I murmured. "We're going beddy-bye, so be a good boy."

"I'll say he's going beddy-bye!" Art

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Hislop snapped. "He's living up to his reputation of being the nastiest drunk in New York."

Buck glared at him, took a long breath. Then he put his head down and started to rush Art Hislop. I could have sworn I saw Hislop reach for his hip, but there was no time to be sure.

"Bat!" Linda screamed. "Don't let him—"

IT WAS easy enough to stop Buck. I didn't want to hit him, so I just stuck my foot out and hooked his leg as he went past.

But the momentum carried him farther than I had thought. He fell with a jar that almost shook the entire ship, slid forward; and his head came up against the table leg with a smart thud. He went out as if someone had clipped him with a beer bottle.

There was a clatter of feet in the passageway and Hoke Scanlon came galloping in. He was toting a gun as big as a cannon. I was just picking Buck up to carry him to his own cabin. I guess everybody was pretty upset and looked it.

Scanlon swept the room with his eyes, then leveled that gun on me. I noticed, especially, that he was handling the thing as if he had been born with it under his pillow. It was aimed exactly at my belt buckle and there was a look in his black eyes that made me suck my stomach in.

For an instant there was stark murder in the air, and all because that fool Bosworth had a skinful.

"Captain!" Grace Taver shrieked.

Linda didn't bother to shriek. She was nearest Hoke's gun arm like a jack-in-the-box. She got both hands on his crisp white sleeve and hung all her weight on it.

That turned the trick. The arm came down, and I could breathe again. For a good four seconds I was as near saying, "Good evening, Pearly Gates!" as a man ever came.

But I wasn't by any means reaching for the jackpot yet. He and I were still standing there, he with a gun dangling, me propping up Buck's inert figure; and he and I were eyeing one another hatefully across a dozen feet of space.

If I had had a gun myself at that moment, I'm not at all sure I wouldn't have slammed a couple of slugs into him just for luck. It's extraordinary, how a man can get so keyed up he'll lose all sense of proportion.

Linda was still thinking fast. "Captain Scanlon," she said in that rich, low voice of hers, "Mr. Bosworth got drunk. He passed out. Please call some stewards and have him put to bed."

That snapped the electric tension. Hoke Scanlon, looking down into Linda's set face, grinned in admiration.

"Miss Haywood," he said, slowly, "what it takes, you got."

He pushed the call bell. Two stewards entered so promptly that I guessed they had been listening just outside the door. A moment later Hoke was following them as they staggered with Buck toward the cabins.

The others broke away from the table as if they were afraid of what someone might say if they sat there another minute. Linda and Mrs. Taver went on deck.

Vicky Seymour watched them go, then let her anxious eyes fall upon Art Hislop, who was still staring at the door through which Hoke and the stewards had lugged Buck. Then she glanced at me in a begging way, as if pleading for a chance to have Art alone.

Well, she could have him, all right. I didn't care for any part of him.

Aimlessly I went down to my cabin, planning to do some work on Mrs. Taver's log of the voyage. But I couldn't seem to get started. Instead, I just sat there, staring at the typewriter, while my mind tried to puzzle out the many things which troubled me.

The spirit on the *Condor* was poisonous. I could feel it as easily as I could feel the dampness of the warm tropic trade winds which came all the way from Africa to run across the white decks of the yacht.

Everybody knows that some ships are

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definitely happy ships. Others aren't. This *Condor* was not. It was as if the ghost of Timmons, the wireless operator, were tip-toeing—

Well, there wasn't any ghost. But is there a spirit which can hang over a ship? The spirit of a murdered man, trying to get even with the one who had murdered him?

Of course not. But any seaman will tell you that mighty queer things can happen on a vessel during a long, deep-water passage. Queer things that your intelligence doesn't explain too easily. Things you don't know the answer to, not even after you've gone ashore and the violence has cooled in your blood and you are trying to remember things coolly, calmly, exactly as they occurred.

CHAPTER XIII

AGAIN THE KNIFE

WE SIGHTED the white flashing light of Los Roques just before dawn. It was only two points off the port bow, which was close enough for a landfall like that.

Captain Scanlon eased the sheets a little to spill some of the wind and to cut our speed a trifle. Garside, the mate, got busy with the pelorus and took a series of bearings on the light, while a quiet-voiced leadsman went to work in the chains, heaving the lead continuously.

Heaven only knows just how word spreads so swiftly aboard a vessel at sea. But ten minutes after we had sighted Los Roques light, almost every passenger and member of the crew had appeared on deck, to stand in little groups staring ahead at that feeble flash as if it were the most important thing that had ever happened to them.

At that, for some it was. It was to be the last light-house beam a number of them were ever to see.

I found Linda Haywood standing there beside me. We were less than twelve degrees north of the equator, yet the dawn wind carried a bite with it and she was wearing a tweed sport coat.

"Is that—Venezuela?" she asked me, nodding at the light.

"It belongs to Venezuela, that island," I told her. "But it isn't the mainland. The treasure, if there is any, is only a dozen or so miles to the westward of that light."

As if he had heard me, the captain said in a low voice, "Southwest by west, half west," and, more loudly, "Mr. Garside, we'll ease the sheets a bit more."

The light moved quite rapidly along our port rail until it took its place almost amidships, so I knew we were slanting off to find the line of cays and reefs to the westward of Los Roques.

"It will be dead ahead now," I said, almost in a whisper, to the small, slim girl at my side.

And already, in the bows, men were working with the gear. Two sailors brought back grappling irons at the end of long coils of light line. These they laid out carefully in the stern. Others were unstopping the anchors and flaking out several shots of chain.

You could feel the growing excitement of the men. They talked loudly, laughed loudly at their work. A couple of stewards, off watch, moved forward and looked silently ahead.

"I—I almost hope we don't find it," Linda whispered.

"Why?" I asked, curiously.

She shook her dark and glossy head. "I'm afraid," she murmured, "of the things that may happen if we do. I—I never thought about that in New York."

"Well, I never thought about it in Miami, either," I said, grimly, not adding that I had been thinking plenty about it since.

THE sun came rushing up with tropic speed. We could now see a lot of tiny islands to port. Some of them looked like single rocks sticking up out of the water, but as we came closer we saw them to be sandy cays covered with mangroves, samphire plants and scrub trees.

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And there began to appear long streaks of lighter water between the *Condor* and the cays; these, I knew, were the savage reefs which caused seamen to give this neighborhood a wide and respectful go-by.

Reluctantly we went down to breakfast. All of us except Buck Bosworth, who had not yet appeared.

"He'll be having a world's record hangover," said Art Hislop, making no effort to conceal the satisfaction in his voice.

"I hope so," said Vicky Seymour—remembering, no doubt, the things Buck had said to Hislop the night before.

"Some day when he gets that ugly," said Hislop, nastily, "somebody's going to beat his ears flat."

Linda Haywood looked up from her grapefruit and gave him a long and level stare.

"It won't be you who does it, Art," she said, evenly.

Hislop's narrow face flushed unpleasantly, and his long, thin fingers drummed restlessly upon the table cloth. He glanced up to meet her gaze, but his eyes, as always, were the first to fall.

Captain Scanlon created a welcome diversion. He came down into the dining saloon with a sheen of excitement on his blocky face. Just then we felt the *Condor* come up into the wind and heard the flutter of her sails. Anchor chain rattled through the hawse pipes.

"We're there," he announced triumphantly.

We all rushed on deck. We were three or four miles west of a tiny cay, perhaps two miles north of another. The seamen had already lowered the canvas. The *Condor* was drifting back on her anchor chain and by the activity in the stern I judged they were going to moor her fore and aft.

And looking more carefully at the surface of the sea, I immediately saw the reason for this caution. Half a mile beyond our stern was a long white streak on the water which extended almost from horizon to horizon. The reef upon which, according to Hoke Scanlon's tale, the *Ulvik* had broken her back before plummeting to the bottom on the other side.

"The wreck is somewhere in there," said Scanlon, pointing to the turqoise sea on the southerly side of the reef. "She'll still be there. There are only a few fishermen and charcoal burners on Los Roques, and a limestone quarry that has a few malaria patients getting out the stone.

"I was here skin-diving for three weeks and I never saw a sail in all that time. For some reason or other the fishermen work south and east of here, and of course the big steamers don't come this near the reef."

Just to make sure I took a bearing on the two cays through the pelorus and compared my fix with the cross on the weathered chart. It matched, perfectly, always providing that those were the cays Hoke Scanlon claimed—a fact I was ready enough to concede.

I was just about ready to concede, too, that the wreck would be where he said it was, and that the treasure would be on it. If not, he was the best actor I had ever seen, and by a wide margin.

The crew was excited. Two dinghies went overside and they began to drag the bottom almost before they got on the other side of the barrier reef. And three men were getting out a diving suit and a portable compressor unit in the bow.

"Buck ought to be seeing this," I said in a dissatisfied way.

Art Hislop and Vicky Seymour turned to look at me.

"Why?" Vicky asked, tossing her head.

"What he wants," said Art Hislop nastily, "is to sleep it off."

But Linda turned fully around. I noticed, suddenly, that she had been losing weight on this voyage. Her cheek bones were more prominent than they had been. They looked almost Oriental. And her eyes were enormous.

"Buck would want to see this," she said, definitely.

And from the rail where she stood as restless as a jitterbug Grace Taver said, "Bat, get him up. Never mind his sleep.

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He'll get enough of that on the way north."

I thought Hoke Scanlon had stopped watching the small boats to listen to this by-play. But I couldn't be sure and anyway it didn't seem important at the time.

So I went through the doghouse into the lounge and down into the passageway which ran amidships from lounge to engine room. Buck's cabin, I remembered, was Number 2 and I went straight to it. I knocked on the door but there was no answer.

I wasn't alarmed. Drunks sleep heavily; I knew that. I knocked again and automatically turned the knob. The panel gave inward and I went in without dreaming there was anything wrong.

THE first thing I noticed was the floor. There was a mammoth dark smear there. I followed it with my eyes. Followed it to the baseboard below his berth, up the baseboard to the berth itself.

It was a tough thing to see. Buck Bosworth lay there on his back, one arm dangling over the edge of the berth. His eyes were open, and so was his mouth, wide, as if he had been just about to yell.

But the thing that was widest open of all was his throat. You could have put your hand into the gaping cut and touched with your fingers the pinkish gray knobs of his backbone. Apparently in his last extremity he had thrown his head back and tried to scream—and died almost instantly.

I don't know how long I stood there, staring incredulously down at this grisly thing which had, only a dozen hours ago, been the Broadway playboy, the amateur yachtsman, Buck Bosworth. Maybe I stood there only ten seconds, maybe a full minute or more.

But then I saw, slanting out just under his left ear, my knife!

My knife? What I mean is, the knife someone had tried to use on my own throat, the knife I had kept in my top bureau draw, under my shirts, for lack of any other weapon.

And here it was, the remembered corrugations of its handle dull with the dried blood which must have fountained up even as the razor-sharp edge sliced across Buck's drunken, unprotected Adam's apple.

It would be satisfying to record here that I kept my wits about me. In my newspaper work I had seen enough dead men, and dead women, too, to lose my instinctive recoiling from the sight of death itself. I had even, from time to time, criticized others for not keeping their heads in emergency, for being careless with evidence which might have pointed accusingly at the killer.

Oh, I knew what to do, all right. I knew I should remove that knife, shielding my fingers with a handkerchief, or something, and that I should hide it until shore authorities inspected it for prints. My intelligence told me to do all these things.

But I didn't obey my intelligence. I obeyed blind, primitive impulse.

I just grabbed that knife, which I knew would also bear my own fingerprints, yanked it out of the wound and shuddered violently as the steel blade creaked against the bone. I twirled the wing nut which held the portlight screen in place, pulled at the screen and dropped the knife out of the porthole.

I HEARD the thing splash before I came to my senses, and then it was too late. The fingerprints that must have been superimposed on mine would have done the trick, and now I had ruined everything.

Oh, well—if you're a fool, you're a fool, and that's just about all there is to it.

I heard through the open portholes the calling of the sailors who were dragging for the treasure-laden wreck. I heard the faint squealing of blocks from somewhere on deck, forward. I heard the soft murmur of the water as the long, slow swells gently lifted the *Condor* and let her sink into the troughs.

I was sharply conscious, amid the silence that encompassed me, of the purring of the

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small engine which ran the electric lighting set.

Two murders already. The wireless operator at the beginning of the voyage, and now the only other man who could have operated the instrument—and they had tried to get me!

That complicated things, their trying to get me, because I couldn't operate a wireless. If they had had their way, though, they would have split my throat open just like—like this.

Cold perspiration dripped off my chin as I saw what I would have looked like had I not dropped to the floor beside my berth and fought it out with the intruder.

I wandered aimlessly around the room, attempting to make up my mind how to break the news on deck. What a trip!

And it had started out so gaily—a musical comedy treasure hunt, I had thought at the time—until I had seen Hoke Scanlon standing there on deck. And then I had stopped thinking of it in terms of a comedy.

Walking slowly back and forth, I noticed dully that the top drawer of Buck's dresser was open. I started to shut it, impelled by some vague impulse to tidy up the room as much as possible. My eye was caught by a gleam of metal which protruded from beneath one of Buck's vivid shirts. I looked at it for a moment, then moved the shirt aside.

There was a small black automatic, flat and ugly and efficient-looking. I picked it up and it felt good in my hand.

I wouldn't have known what to do with the knife, whether to grip it with the blade up or down. But I knew what to do with a gun, all right. I slid the clip out of the corrugated handle. It was filled with bullets. I replaced the clip and without any scruples at all put the gun in my pocket.

The way things looked now, I would be needing that gun in the not-so-distant future.

There was no use postponing the bad news any longer. So I stepped over to the wall and put my finger on the steward's bell. When the man knocked I was right there to meet him. I opened the door only a crack and stood with my tall body completely blocking his view of the room.

"Please ask Mr. Hislop and the captain to come down here right away," I told him.

His expression changed and he did his best to look past me. But I closed the door in his furtively peering face.

CHAPTER XIV

WAIT FOR SLAUGHTER

IT DIDN'T take them long to answer a summons like that. I let them in and again closed off the steward's view with the door.

When I had locked the door I turned and there they were, standing halfway across the cabin, just staring at the terrible figure on the berth.

For a long time there was no sound from them, no sound at all that originated within that compact room. Then Hoke Scanlon's footsteps as he marched across the rug and touched Buck's hand.

"Cold," he said in a gritty voice.

He lifted Buck's arm and let it drop. He looked at the dull and drying blood. He turned his head slowly and his small black eyes bored into mine.

"Know anything about this?" he demanded.

"No more than you do," said I. "Maybe a whole lot less."

His eyes glittered at that, but he let it pass and transferred his attention to Art Hislop.

"Were you in your cabin all night?"

"I was," said Hislop, digging out a cigarette with fingers that shook so they tore slender tube into shredded bits.

"Yours is the next cabin to this," Hoke Scanlon persisted. "Didn't you hear anything?"

"What would there be to hear?" Hislop retorted. "Certainly Buck wouldn't have done any yelling with a throat like that."

"A mess," said Scanlon.

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"At least," I said, "you won't have to worry about his fixing the radio and sending messages."

They both looked at me.

"One of those cracks will be the death of you some day," said Scanlon, biting his words off short.

"It isn't for lack of trying that I'm not dead now," I retorted. "Somebody on this boat has a powerful yen for throat-cutting."

Art Hislop kept swallowing. He was trying not to look at the man he had once known so well in New York, but he couldn't seem to help looking.

Hoke Scanlon was staring at me. I could have sworn that he was mentally measuring the distance between us and getting ready to hurl himself across those few feet of blood-stained space. But that was all right. I could feel the comfortable weight of Buck's automatic against my hip. And I wasn't in any mood to fool around.

It was Art Hislop who snapped the gathering tension. He had been growing whiter and whiter. Now even his lips had lost their color.

"Let's get out of here!" he blurted. "I—I'm going to be sick!"

He bolted for the door, unlocked it and fled into the passageway. A moment later we heard the slamming of his door. The cabin steward was peeping into the room. He tried to jerk his face away but Hoke Scanlon called him back.

"Bring the bosun to me right away," he snapped. "And don't do any talking. Not one word."

The steward vanished. Hoke Scanlon turned to me.

"Where were you during the night, Mason?" he demanded.

"Around and about," I said flatly. "Where were you?"

He stood there, just studying my expression, for several seconds. Then, unexpectedly, he shrugged.

"I never saw anybody quite like you, Bat," he said in a voice that was curiously without bitterness. "You sure go at things the hard way." He looked at me queerly.

There was a knock on the door, which broke the tension. The bosun entered: a small, almost hairless man of indeterminate age. He was built like an ape, whose egg-shaped and egg-bald head seemed to have been perched upon a body seven times too large for it.

His tiny blue eyes focused instantly upon the grisly figure on the berth. The strips of skin which marked the place his eyebrows should have been, lifted slightly but he showed no emotion at all.

"Peltz, sew that up in sailcloth," said Scanlon, jerking his blue-black chin at Buck's silent figure, "and we'll put it overboard at midnight. No more regular burials. The crew will get itchy."

I looked at Scanlon. "How many more burials are you expecting, public and private?" I asked.

He met my stare impassively. "Who knows how many there'll be," he countered softly.

WE BROKE the news to the women on deck. Hoke Scanlon and I, I mean. Art Hislop dogged it. He wouldn't come out of his cabin. He was sick, he called through the panel. So that left the hot potato to Hoke and me.

There was no use trying to let them down an inch at a time: I gave them the works all at once. They were standing at the rail watching the crew drag for the wreck of the *Ulvik*.

"Buck is dead," I said.

Linda looked at me unbelievingly, then closed her shadowed eyes and clung tightly to the rail while she fought for composure. Grace Taver clapped her ringed fingers to her mouth to choke down a scream. Vicky Seymour, looking older than I remembered, glanced toward the doghouse.

"Where's Art?" she asked, on a lifting note.

"In his cabin," I said, contemptuously. "He says he's sick."

Grace Taver asked in a strangled voice, "How—how did he die?"

The captain beat me to the bad news.

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"Mr. Bosworth was killed."

"You mean—murdered?" Mrs. Taver breathed.

"Yes," Scanlon replied.

"How?" she asked, hoarsely. "With a gun?"

"With a knife," Scanlon said.

Instantly Grace Taver's eyes swung at me in a look of such forthright suspicion that it shocked me. The others caught that accusing look, too, and Hoke Scanlon grinned in a way that made me want to smash his face to a pulp.

"Grace," Vicky Seymour shrilled. "I want to go home. I don't want to hunt treasure any more."

"I've had plenty, too," Linda said, quietly. "I've had all I want of this."

Grace Taver seemed not to hear them. She was still looking at me. But Hoke Scanlon heard them, all right.

"Ladies," he said, firmly, "it isn't a good thing to stand arguing like this on deck, here, where the entire crew can listen. They're watching us already and wondering what's up."

"Well," Linda said, "why don't you tell them?"

"We'll go down into the doghouse," Hoke said, "where we can talk."

"What talk is necessary?" Vicky wailed. "Call those boats aboard and start to the nearest port right away. I'm going home on a Pan-American clipper, and Art is going with me. The rest of you can do what you like."

"Mrs. Taver," said the captain, his tone hardening, "let's go."

SO WE all went down into the glassed-in shelter of the doghouse. I was sorry for Vicky Seymour. At a time like this she wanted Art, and he had failed her, as he had probably failed her before and would unquestionably fail her again.

I noticed particularly that when she sat down it was as far away as she could get from Linda. Linda noticed it, too. Shocked as she was by the news about Buck, Linda seemed to notice whatever she looked at. She had a head on her.

"H-how was Buck killed?" Vicky faltered. "In a fight with somebody, like the wireless man?"

"He was murdered," said Hoke, flatly. "Murdered in bed, probably while he was sleeping off his drunk."

If he had done the trick, I thought, he had more nerve than any other man I had ever seen.

"I want to get off this yacht!" Vicky said shrilly.

"Sure, Miss Seymour," said Hoke Scanlon, soothingly. "I guess we all do. But two or three more days won't make any difference at all. About Mr. Bosworth, I mean. We'll have to put him overside tonight. You know, the weather down here."

Linda winced, but said nothing. Grace Taver looked as if she were about to keel over, but she had reserves of strength I hadn't suspected. Vicky moaned and said, "Where's Art?" but nobody paid any attention.

"You mean," I said to Hoke, "that now we're here you intend to hunt for the treasure?"

"No!" Linda whispered.

"I mean," said the captain, looking straight at me, "that the crew won't stand for anything else."

"So now we have to worry about the crew," I said, sardonically. "Two men are murdered, and the owner wants to go home, but the crew won't let us."

"What's the trouble with the crew?" Grace Taver demanded.

"The crew has been promised one share of the treasure to split up among themselves. They know they've practically got their hands on it now, and they have. If I order them to come aboard and sail away, leaving the treasure here for someone else, there'll be plently of trouble."

"There's plenty of trouble right now," I reminded him. "Or how many murders would you need before you thought things aren't just as they should be?"

That got through to him. His face grew hard. "Things are not as they should be right now. You bet they aren't. But if

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you are worried, I'll post an armed guard tonight at each end of the passageway."

"Thanks," I said, dryly. "I think I'd be safer taking my own precautions."

I was sorry for Grace Taver. She needed that treasure so badly she could hardly bring herself to demand that the cruise be abandoned. But at last she managed it.

"Captain," she said, faintly, "pull up our anchor and head for port. We—we can come back later."

"We're here now," the captain insisted.

Anger came into Grace Taver's eyes. Anger and a new fear.

"I'm the owner, Captain Scanlon," she said, with dignity. "I order you to sail immediately."

"Yes, you're owner," the captain conceded. "But I am master of this vessel, and I'm responsible for the safety of the ship, the passengers and the crew."

I grinned at that and he didn't like it. That dull red glow appeared in his black eyes. But he somehow checked his rising temper.

"It would not be safe," he continued, "to leave this spot for two or three days, so I shall not leave it. And you can do what you like about that when we get ashore."

"You mean," gasped Mrs. Taver, "that the crew might—mutiny?"

"Just that," Scanlon snapped. "You promised they should have a share of that gold divided among them. They want that gold."

"How fortunate for them," I murmured, "that the radio man was murdered and there's nobody left to run the thing. Otherwise we would call for help—against mutiny."

The captain shrugged and turned deliberately away. "I'll weigh anchor, Mrs. Taver, just the minute I can. We ought to find the wreck any moment now."

And went on deck.

THE women all looked at me. There wasn't much I could say. We didn't have any more chance of making Scanlon weigh anchor than we did of taking the *Condor* off the water and putting her into an outside loop.

"Listen, Mrs. Taver," I said, quietly. "Captain Scanlon is a hard man. One of the hardest I've ever known. He chose his own crew and you can see by looking at them that they're as hard as he is. If I were you, I wouldn't deliberately rub him the wrong way. Or at least, not too often."

The eyes of the three women were upon me. There was a look of accusation in them, as if they thought I could do something about it if I wanted to, but wouldn't.

"Then, Mr. Mason," said Mrs. Taver, coldly, "what do you recommend?"

I stood quite still, doing my best to get my milling thoughts in order. I wasn't feeling too sure about anything. Especially about the immediate state of my own health.

They had tried once—no, twice—to knife me and they might not miss next time. They wouldn't even have to get into my cabin to give me the business. A knife could saw across my windpipe on deck, or in a deserted passageway, just as well as in the seclusion of my own cabin.

All anyone would have to do would be to get behind me when I wasn't on guard. Nice, eh?

And if Scanlon had anything to do with those other two murders, he had everything to gain and mighty little to lose by getting rid of me. The snap of the rope when he dropped through the trap wouldn't hurt any more if he were to be hanged for three murders.

"This is about as good a recommendation as I can offer," I said, slowly. "And I make it chiefly because I can't think of anything else we can do. Since we can't force Scanlon to head for port right away, we'd better rock along like this with as good grace as we can manage.

"I suggest we keep in one another's sight by day, and at night be sure our doors are not only locked, but jammed. Put the back of a strong chair under the knob and kick the legs in toward the door itself."

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There was a sudden gasp from Vicky Seymour. "Are you trying to warn us that some more of us might be—that there may be more killings?"

She was close to the ragged edge, so I lied to her. "Not at all," I said, soothingly. "But why take any chances?"

She pushed herself to her feet. "How—how do I know that Art hasn't been murdered in his room?" she cried.

Before I could say anything to reassure her she went hurrying down the stairs to the passageway. Come right down to it, how did any of us know he hadn't been murdered?

I walked after her, keeping my steps slow so as not to alarm Grace Taver and Linda. At the bottom of the stairs I stood still, watching her as she knocked on Hislop's door. And I was conscious of a sudden quick relief when I heard his petulant voice calling, "Who is it? What do you want?"

I didn't feel like discussing things any more with the others, so I went on deck. And the moment I got there I realized that word of this second murder had spread among the crew. It was easy to see by the way those hard-faced men swiveled their eyes at me, by the way they sidled up to one another and whispered out of the corners of their mouths.

And believe it or not, the crews of the two dinghies dragging the bottom half a mile away—they knew it, too. They kept watching the *Condor* as if they expected the ghosts of Buck and the wireless operator to start parading the deck at any moment.

ALL that day there was an air of expectancy hanging over the *Condor* like a pea-soup fog. By nature I am not especially jumpy; but when, in the early afternoon, a seaman clumsily tripped on a coiled halyard and sprawled headlong on the deck, cold sweat burst out of my skin and I made a fast grab at my hip, where Buck's gun was pocketed.

That night on deck everything looked peaceful enough. The small boats were riding quietly at the boom; the stars overhead were hot and close and bright; and the *Condor*, anchored fore and aft just off the reef, swung gently to the almost invisible ground swell. Certainly no yacht in the world could have looked more peaceful than she.

But she wasn't peaceful at all, really. The women remained in their cabins, where they had had their dinner served on trays. Art Hislop was still in his cabin, probably oppressed by a bad case of the wah-wahs. So I was all alone, and had been, ever since that discussion about Buck's death.

The sailors seemed as jittery as if they, too, were afraid of their lives. They moved wordlessly along the decks, now and then glancing behind them as if they thought the devil himself might be following.

Captain Scanlon, very nautical-looking in his clean uniform of starched white linen, paced back and forth along the starboard rail, restless as a beetle on a hot plate.

But I did notice this; when his mate, the tall and saturnine Garside, came aft on his rubber-soled shoes and spoke before Scanlon knew he was there, the captain turned and cursed him with a flat malevolence which was as sinister as a rifle shot in the dark.

I remained on deck until midnight, taking particular care to stay close to the rail and to avoid the deep shadows as much as possible.

It was the least I could do for Buck Bosworth, to be up there when they sent him over the side. He had never been worth a hoot except as an amateur sailor, but who was I to talk? Both of us had a way with boats, and with our fists, and that was about all there was to it.

If I had had his money, I would probably be as thoroughly useless as he, but I had come up the hard way. He got ugly drunk; my disposition was none too sweet even when I was sober.

So what? So nothing. He was dead, with a hole in his throat you could have put your fist in. And I? Well, from where I stood at this moment it looked

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as if I, too, were a pretty poor insurance risk.

And the trouble was, I couldn't do a thing about it. If I told Grace Taver and the others what I knew about Hoke Scanlon, what good would that do me? Not a bit. He would probably kill me—or have me killed—at once, and the knowledge I had given them might endanger the women by its mere possession.

All right, suppose I deliberately picked a row with Scanlon, and managed to kill him? What then? Easy. His crew would avenge him immediately and I'd be deader than a finnan haddie. No use stepping into that.

No, the only thing I could do was to follow the advice I had given the women—to rock along. And if a break came, grab it.

Just before midnight they brought Buck's body up through one of the forward hatches. Like that of the radio man, it had been sewed into a shapeless sailcloth bundle, lumpy at each end. There was no pretense, this time, of any ceremony. Four sailors simply carried the thing to the rail on the low side and looked at Hoke Scanlon.

Before I reached them the captain had nodded and the ghostly white bundle went spinning slantingly down through the water, leaving a phosphorescent trail behind to mark its passing.

For a moment or two I was pretty sore that they hadn't waited for me. But that was all right, I decided at last. What could I do for Buck Bosworth now?"

CHAPTER XV

SHOW YOUR CHIPS

I WAS on deck next morning when an excited voice came clearly across the turquoise sea.

"Captain!" yelled one of the sailors. "We've found it!"

One of the dinghies appeared to be anchored by the grapnel which she had been dragging astern. The other small boat had hurried alongside the first and a sailor in her sternsheets was sounding with a light lead, dropping it straight down in an effort to gauge the contour of whatever it was the grapnel had snagged.

Another sailor peeled off his blouse, stood for a moment on a thwart, and then dived cleanly into the water. He was gone for what seemed an interminable time before his sleek wet head broke the surface.

Across half a mile of quiet water his excited voice came clearly to those of us, guests and crew alike, who lined the rail of the big yacht.

"Captain!" he yelled. "It's a steamer, all right. She's lying on her side. I could feel the plates and rivets in her hull."

"Put a buoy on the end of that grapnel line and stand by," replied the captain, his voice exultant. He turned toward the foredeck of the *Condor*. "Bosun, shake a leg getting the diving gear set up in the motor lifeboat."

"Five more minutes, Cap'n," called the hairless bosun from the foredeck.

From just behind my shoulder a sweetly husky voice said in anxious tones, "Bat. I'm sorry they've found it."

Linda came alongside and stood beside me at the rail so close I could smell the fragrance of her hair.

"Why are you sorry, Linda?" I asked.

"Things are bad enough already," she said in a low voice. "They'll be much worse with all that gold aboard."

"They haven't found the gold yet," I told her. "A lot of years have gone by since Scanlon went down and found it—and left it there."

"They'll find it," she said, with a curious certainty.

"Why did you join the syndicate, if you didn't want them to find it?" I asked, curiously.

"I did want them to find it then. But the main reason I came was that I wanted to get away from New York for a while."

"That isn't why she came," said Vicky Seymour, her rubber-soled yachting shoes making not a sound as she came up be-

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hind us. There was a quality in Vicky's voice which spun us around. It was shrill, strident, almost on the edge of hysteria. "She came to spite me!"

"Vicky!" said Linda, appalled. "I didn't even know you had signed up in Grace's syndicate when I—"

BUT there was no stopping Vicky Seymour. There were twin spots of bright color on her prominent cheek bones. Her eyes were expanded and her mouth, brilliantly outlined with lipstick, was working convulsively.

"Ever since Art dropped you and started taking me around instead," she went on in a rush of words, "you've tried every way in the world to get even. You didn't invite me to your party at the Ritz. You've had me scratched off some of the nicest lists in town.

"And just as soon as you heard that Art was coming on this treasure hunt you fell all over yourself signing up to come. And don't think I don't know how you've been trying to get him back ever since we left Miami. Why can't you be satisfied with Bat and the captain?"

Her words trailed away and she stood there, white and shaking. Linda looked as if someone had driven all the breath from her body.

"Vicky," she gasped, "I think you must be out of your head. Try to get Art back? I never had him, never wanted him; always hated it when I drew him for a dinner partner. If he never speaks to me again I'll be tickled to death. As for scratching you off lists—"

She stopped, hopelessly, and shrugged. "If I tried to explain why you've missed the train, you wouldn't understand."

She turned on her heel and walked away from Vicky, who stolidly watched her disappear into the deck house. Vicky looked at me and there was a venomous glint in her eye as she said, "Do you believe her, Bat?"

I was pretty sorry for her, she was so desperately unhappy. It was her tough luck that she had fallen in love with Art.

"Tell me," she said, stamping her foot. "Do you believe her?"

"Yes," I said, very quietly, "I do. And so do you."

VICKY SEYMOUR didn't want any more of that. I did not even watch her as she went away from me. Deliberately I focused my attention upon the preparations for raising the treasure.

The lifeboat, with the portable compressor and the diving gear aboard, was about ready to shove off.

Hoke Scanlon was everywhere at once. He had changed into an old, work-stained uniform with a seagoing cap whose gold ornament was green with salt-water tarnish. His black eyes glittered brightly but his orders were crisp, efficient—and quiet.

Tough-looking as his crew was, the men worked well under the driving supervision of the hairless bosun and obeyed every order almost before it was given.

The mate, too, had changed: he wore clean dungarees and rope-soled sandals. With a small group of men he was warping the *Condor* a trifle closer to the reef.

"Mr. Mate," said Scanlon after a while, "take over. I'm making the first dive."

Without another word he dropped into the motor lifeboat. It chugged away, heading for the two dinghies.

I walked over to the spot at the rail where Mrs. Taver and Art Hislop were standing. To my astonishment they both gave me dirty looks and turned away from me. While I was thinking that over they both went below.

Then, without waiting to see Hoke dive, I pushed myself away from the rail, crossed the deck and ducked into the doghouse. Art Hislop was not there. Nor was he in any of the public rooms. I tramped down the passageway and knocked at his door.

"Who is it?" he called from the other side of the panel.

"Bat Mason. I want to talk to you."

"I'm busy," he snapped.

"But not so busy you can't talk to me right now," I retorted.

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I heard a drawer slam shut. Then the door was opened just a crack, behind which appeared a segment of Art Hislop's face.

"What do you want?" he asked.

I PUT my foot inside the door, then leaned against the panel. For a moment he put his weight against mine, but I was all set and he wasn't.

He stepped aside quickly, which was smart of him. It almost—but not quite—spilled me. When I recovered I was inside the room and he was standing there, his right hand hidden inside the breast of his yachting jacket.

His face wasn't pretty, it was hating me so. I wondered why he had built up such a scunner against me, but I wasn't interested enough to ask.

"Stop fooling with that gun, Art," I said, carelessly. "If you haul it out, you'll have to start shooting."

Deliberately I turned my back to him, walked over to a chair and sat down. When I looked at him again his right hand was in the clear.

"It's time we had a talk," I told him. "I want to know something."

"What do you want to know?"

"Several things. There's been too much killing around this vessel and I'd just as soon there wouldn't be any more. That's why I'm interested in the background of this voyage. How did you happen to take Hoke Scanlon to Grace Taver?"

For several long seconds Art Hislop stared down at me before he replied. And when he did reply I could tell he was thinking out each word before he spoke it.

"He told me enough of his story," he said, slowly, "so I believed he had something here. It sounded good. I tried to interest two or three wealthy men I knew socially. But there were two strikes on me just as soon as I mentioned treasure hunting. And besides, Hoke wouldn't give me details enough so I could sell the idea.

"Then I remembered this boat of Grace's. I knew she couldn't put it in commission this year on account of the expense. So I suggested she get some of her crowd interested.

"Hoke showed her his proofs—the papers you saw the first day out—and she went nuts over the idea right away."

"How did Hoke happen to tell you his story?" I asked, trying to keep my voice casual. "He didn't go running all over New York with it, did he?"

Hislop's uneasy eyes touched mine for an instant and then flickered away.

"A gambler introduced him to me last winter at Miami," he said. "He told Hoke I'd be able to put him in touch with the right people."

"For how much of a cut?" I demanded, sharply.

"That," said Hislop, his eyes steadying for an instant, cold and hard, "isn't any of your so-and-so business."

"Maybe not," I shrugged. "But whatever your cut is with Hoke, added to the share of the syndicate that Vicky bought for you, has you sitting pretty—if the gold is found."

To that Art Hislop said not one word. But as he stared down at me, I saw that expression coming back into his ferrety face. The expression I had noticed only once before. I tucked my feet under my chair so if I had to come up, I could come up fast.

"By the way," I said, "Linda and Vicky had a set-to a few minutes ago."

"What about?"

I got to my feet and started toward the door. "About you," I said over my shoulder. "This boat is pretty small, Hislop, for the amateur two-timing you're trying to pull. If you're on anyone's payroll, why don't you behave?"

I opened the door and looked back at him. He was shaking. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette, but his fingers were trembling so badly he couldn't tear the foil off the unopened packet.

"May I help you?" I asked, politely.

He turned on me, his face contorted with fury, and cursed me as I had seldom been cursed in my life. I had thought I knew all the words, but I didn't know

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half of them. In the midst of it, I grinned at him and closed the door between us.

It was the only thing I could do. If I had waited another moment, I'd have gotten mad and gone back there after him. And I'd have had to do it with my gun out.

It wasn't time for that—yet.

CHAPTER XVI

YELLOW ANSWER

I WAS watching at the rail when, on the other side of the reef, Hoke Scanlon came up from his dive. They helped him into the motor lifeboat and began to unscrew the face-plate of his helmet.

And before they got it off, word that he had emerged somehow percolated to the nethermost recesses of the *Condor*. It looked as if every member of her crew, down to the lowliest pantryman, was lining the rail, watching.

The afterguard was there, too. Grace Taver and Art Hislop came up together, Vicky and Linda one at a time, and hurried to the rail. Such was the waiting silence that when Hislop struck a match we all jumped at that sharp sound.

They finally got Hoke's face-plate off.

"The gold's there!" he called, his voice booming hollowly inside the helmet.

A great cheer went up from the lifeboat and the hovering dinghies. It was echoed from the rail of the *Condor*. Grace Taver swayed. Linda grabbed her, steadied that fat, tight-corseted figure.

"You did it, Grace," she said. "Just as you promised."

"Yes," Mrs. Taver panted, "but at what a price! Linda, darling, help me below, will you? I want to lie down."

I stepped forward to take her other arm, but she drew sharply away.

"I asked Linda, not you," she snapped, not even looking at me.

"Well!" I murmured, astonished. And stepped aside.

They went below. I moved up to Art and Vicky. "What's eating her, any idea?" I asked.

Art grinned. A little triumphantly, I thought.

"At a guess," he said, blandly, "I'd say she didn't like you."

"That's a big help to me," I retorted, and went back to my position at the rail.

They were busy, over there on the other side of the reef. The helpers were peeling the diving suit from Hoke Scanlon's heavy body and another diver was impatiently waiting to put it on.

One of the dinghies came over to the *Condor*. A sailor clambered to the deck, rushed to the lazarette and returned with an armful of strong canvas bags—money bags. With these, the dinghy hastened back to the motor lifeboat.

Linda Haywood came on deck, looked briefly around, then came over to the rail beside me. She hardly glanced at the activities in the boat.

"What have you been doing to Grace?" she asked, simply.

"I haven't an idea in the world," I said. "Didn't she tell you?"

"No. I asked her and she just started to cry," Linda said in a troubled voice.

"Do you think it has anything to do with Art Hislop?" I asked.

She looked quickly at me. "What makes you think that?" she countered, guardedly.

"It seems to date, this new attitude of hers, from just about the time I stopped in at Art Hislop's cabin and had a little chat with him," I answered.

"It might be Art who has turned her against you," she said, slowly. "It's something. She told me she had trusted the publisher of your paper to select a man—and she apologized to me for his sending you."

I laughed at that. "Did she warn you against me?"

"She did," Linda said, gravely.

"I think," I said, "it's about time I had another talk with Art Hislop. I'm getting a little fed up with him. It seems to me he's doing more than his share of playing both ends against the middle."

She said nothing at all to that. She just stood there with both elbows on the

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teak rail, watching the activities across the water.

HOKE SCANLON transferred into one of the dinghies and was rowed back to the *Condor*. Queerly, his gimlet eyes were fixed upon me as he came up the boarding ladder to the deck.

"You thought it was a phony, Mason, didn't you?" he crowed.

"Yeah, I did," I admitted.

Standing beside me, he plunged his hand into his pocket and passed me half a dozen heavy gold coins. I examined them, conscious that Linda's fragrant head was very close to mine as she looked down at the dully-glowing coins in my palm. One gold piece was a British guinea, another a French *louis d'or* and the others San Lorenzan gold pesos.

"You still think it's a phony?" Hoke persisted, now grinning at Linda and at Vicky, who had hurried over.

"Oh, no!" Vicky breathed, and in her voice was a note of relief that was as astonishing as it was heartfelt.

"So you thought this might not have been on the level, did you?" I asked, looking straight at her.

She met my eyes fully. "Of course not," she said, breathlessly. "I believed Art all the time."

But Hoke Scanlon wasn't waiting for her answer. He was waiting for mine.

"We're not back in Miami, yet," I answered him. "And two men have already been murdered. Now you ask me, I'll tell you. Yes, I still think it's a phony."

A look of admiration came into his hard black eyes.

"Bat," he said, "do you know, if something happens to you I'll be almost sorry."

"Hoke," I said into the instant silence, "you'll be more than that. If anything happens to me you haven't any idea just how sorry you'll be!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Anything can happen!

That's just what makes railroading so dog-goned interesting. A schedule can be arranged and running smoothly when—blooey—Mrs. MacGillicuddy's pig gets caught in a switch at Whatzis Junction and the best laid plans of men go up the flue.

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BY E. HOFFMAN PRICE

Author of "Allah Sends a Reaper," "Guns for Ethiopia," etc.

Wayne's captors rode like madmen; and when he reeled from weariness, they tied him to his saddle

Heart of a Thief

One for the book: How a smart doctor made a smart investment in Kurdistan; and how in proper time—though in somewhat unorthodox fashion—he realized one hundred percent on that investment

HARVEY Wayne, M. D., Ph. D., Sc. D. was roughing it. The soldiers detailed by the King of Iraq were too thirsty to curse, and the muleteers were too tired to beat their shaggy beast. But Doctor Wayne sat easily in the saddle of his cream-colored donkey.

Sweat cut channels in the dust that grayed his lean cheeks; his bushy brows and close-clipped mustache were now modeled in the dust that walled the horizon in bronze. He ignored discomfort, and looked ahead.

A new decoration was in his baggage, but the King of Iraq was entirely out of his mind. The king would live. Whenever worried doctors consulted Wayne, the patient lived.

It was all routine. There was no hearty handclasp, no personal reassurance. Your garage mechanic took far more personal

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interest in your Ford than Wayne took in you. He had made a million that way, and could afford to follow his costly hobby.

Harvey Wayne was going to Kurdistan to capture the world's last fine rug. It hung in the tomb of Imam Ayyub, a Moslem saint. It was the work of Maqsoud of Kashan, who wove as no man before or since had woven a rug. It was holy as the spot it decorated, but Wayne wanted it and he was going after it. That Uthman Khan would consider the mere mention of purchase as blasphemy never occurred to Wayne.

As he rode into Kurdistan, he said to himself, "Lucky the king's heart didn't cut up a week sooner, or I couldn't make this trip."

Wayne was, after all, thinking of his patient.

Hills finally cropped up out of the brazen haze, and blocked the advance. The mules filed in and out among the simmering boulders of a dry watercourse. Then the air became thinner, and the trail steeper.

Ahead, he could now see the Zagros Range, high and purple and white-capped; with gray granite bulwarks, and patches of green that blended into blue. The red earth of an old landside gashed the iron black shadows of a hill.

A puff of dust kicked up just in front of the lead mule, and a shrill whine told Wayne that someone was shooting at the caravan. A second, then a third; the muleteers howled, the beasts scattered as the drivers bolted for the rocks and scraggly brush. In this, they were a split second behind the Iraq soldiers, and only a little ahead of the thin, far-off *smack-smack-smack* of high-powered rifles.

Wayne had not quite committed himself to dismounting when he saw the stirring close at hand. Men were riding from rocks that could not possibly have hidden a goat; six men, loaded down with bandoliers of cartridges that gleamed in the setting sun.

They were taller than the doctor; he was an inch more than two yards high. Their turbans were enormous, their jackets of more colors than he could count, and they wore an amazing collection of silver mounted daggers and revolvers.

WAYNE reached for his glasses, carefully polished them, set them into place to crown his jutting nose. The leader of the horsemen had gray eyes, like Wayne, and a nose just as commanding, except that it was beaked, with flaring nostrils. Wayne said, casually, "Good evening, gentlemen."

He spoke English and French and German, naturally enough; he had a smattering of Syrian Arabic, enough for bazaar trading. The Kurdish dialect was entirely beyond him, but Wayne was not perturbed because his interpreter was crouching behind a rock and praying.

The tall man with the enormous turban and mustaches answered, "*Bon soir, monsieur*. I do not spik the Inglese, but I *parle français;* you comprehend him?"

Wayne answered, "When that ass of an interpreter gets his wits and comes out, I'll tell him I won't need him. I'm Dr. Wayne—"

"Of course." The rock-faced man gravely bowed and touched a big and grimy hand successively to turban and eyes and heart. "My spies know all about you. I am Uthman Khan of the Hakkiari Kurds, and you are the friend of the King of Iraq. In honor of his majesty's recovery, I won't take the guns away from his soldiers."

He dismounted, and Wayne followed suit. The Kurdish prince drew a dagger, dug into his saddle bags and produced two large cucumbers. He said, "Try one, doctor. My wife sent them from our garden."

They seated themselves on a hot rock and ate. Wayne called for cigarettes, and had his servant offer the *khan* a pack. "You came to meet me?"

"No. Just my routine border patrol. But you are welcome." Uthman Khan used his dagger point to pick a cucumber fragment from his teeth. "As a friend of my neighboring king, you are very welcome."

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Wayne was quite at ease with royalty. He had seen too many kings and ex-kings in sick rooms to be impressed. A famous *hakim* was welcome where other strangers were not. There was no conceit about Wayne. He took himself for granted, and as he mounted up to ride at the *khan's* right, he reflected, "The king had precious little to do with this reception."

He was right; at all events, the king's soldiers were praising Allah and hurrying back to the sweltering plain.

By night, Uthman Khan and his guest camped in an upland meadow. They ate sour milk and leather-tough bread and onions; there was cheese, rock-hard and gray. Wayne liked this crude fare, and he rested well, with his sleeping bag spread out on granite outcroppings.

Each day's march brought him nearer the *khan's* mountain capital and the shrine of Imam Ayyub. It made him younger, fresher, just thinking of the holy carpet.

The muddled descriptions of it danced into color behind his eyelids before he awoke of a morning. Four hundred years ago, Maqsoud of Kashan had woven it. There was nothing like it in the whole world. It was fitting that Dr. Wayne should have this holy fabric. There were too many saints, most of them imposters.

At last, one evening, he saw the rim-rock that hemmed in green meadows, where black-fleeced sheep grazed on the gentle slopes of a bowl-shaped valley. The sun dipped down and reddened the gray crags, and put rose and gilt on the masonary and dried mud brick of the town that perched on the further ridge.

"That is my capital." Uthman Khan gestured. "No man has entered or left without the permission of my family for eighteen hundred years."

"Saladin's ancestors lived here," Wayne observed, with hardly enough inflection to make it a question.

"Yes. Salah-ad-Din Yusuf the son of Ayyub the son of Shirkuh, was a Kurd from Kurdistan."

Wayne scanned the rocky horizon before purple shadows blotted out all detail. Somewhat aside from the walled city, and in the level spot between crags, he saw a small white cupola; it was like half a golf ball set up on a child's block. An ugly little building, whitewashed rock or mud bricks. He gestured. "A guardhouse?"

Uthman Khan touched his forehead, his lips, his heart. "No. That is the tomb of Imam Ayyub, may Allah be well pleased with him. He will intercede for us on the Day of Fate, and beg Allah's pardon for us."

IN THE morning, Wayne stood on the lowest of the terraced roofs of the *khan's* bleak fortress. Walls two feet thick. The windows were small slits cut through masonary, and unglazed.

The floors were rammed earth, grease-stained; smoke-smudge rafters supported withes which in their turn supported the clay of roof and ceiling.

Wayne was still shivering from the winds that had whistled through his room all night. He washed in an earthen bowl. A grimy servant wearing baggy pantaloons, three daggers, and a flintlock pistol, brought him a tray of apricots and nectarines and bread like a strip of rawhide. As he ate, Wayne looked down at the tall women who hurried to the well sunk in the public square.

They were shapely and unveiled. Velvet caps hid their heavy hair, and golden coins festooned their headgear. Some were barefooted, but all went swaying along, quite unaware of the rocks, the pools of mud, the loud-smelling offal of the narrow street.

Dogs snarled and fought for bones and rubbish housewives dumped from their windows. Flies, no longer paralyzed from the night chill, began to buzz. Horses and camels, coming from the *serai* where traders lodged with their bales, added to the scent of the town.

Wayne adjusted his glasses. His nostrils crinkled. He was thinking, "Look at the surface drainage that must leak through the coping of that well. Sacred cat, why aren't they all dead of cholera or typhoid!"

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Vultures soared overhead. They were the street cleaning department. Below, blind men were begging. Children toddled, clinging to their mothers' gaudy skirts. Infants, riding pick-a-back, had eyelids blackened with flies. "No wonder, filth and glare, they've got ophthalmia! Need sewers and a good doctor up here."

Later, Uthman Khan came to greet him. A servant followed with a tea service. There were small cups of Persian blue, well flyspecked. In this they were like lumps of crude sugar, which were shattered into shape with a little hammer. But a collector cannot be too fastidious.

The *khan's* son had come. He looked like his father, but he stood well apart. Despite his black beard and fierce mustaches, and twenty-odd years, he would not presume to sit in his father's presence or even draw near without permission.

Uthman Khan's voice was alive with pride when he pointed and said to his guest, "My son, Shirkuh. He has led ten raids, without losing a man. He keeps our flocks well built up."

"Er . . . talented young fellow," Wayne said, bowing to acknowledge Shirkuh's presence. "Might get hurt, though."

Uthman Khan missed the irony entirely. He said, "I have six other sons, though some are too young for raiding. So they tend sheep and hunt wolves."

Shirkuh's glance was almost as unblinking and wild as that of the falcon balanced on Uthman Khan's wrist, just as grave and reserved. The bird's talons sank deep into the leather wrist guard as he eyed the stranger.

Finally, after exchanging inquiries about health and the night's sleep—Wayne learned rapidly—he said, "I would like to pay my respects to the keeper of Ayyub's tomb."

The *khan* nodded and rose.

A SHORT ride brought Wayne and his host to the tomb. Near it was a brush leanto, with one side walled up with mud and rocks to check some of the winds that whistled by night. A spring bubbled from a clump of shrubbery. The guardian of the shrine was drawing water. He straightened creaky knees, and stood there, staring the callers full in the eye.

He seemed amazed. His white beard twitched, but his toothless gums for a moment failed to bite off any words. During that moment, Wayne got his glimpse of the holy carpet.

The dirt floor of the shrine was swept clean. The saint was buried under a slab of uncarved stone. The rug hung on the wall, filling most of the further end of the cubicle. It might have been five feet by nine, perhaps less. Dust coated its nape, for it was too holy to be touched.

Wane stood there, as rigid as the ragged old guardian.

The *khan* was saying, "Take off your shoes, and you may go closer." But Wayne did not hear this. He had but one sense left. A miracle blossomed from that dirt wall. Only the dyemaster who had dipped the wool could explain that cream hue like a leopard's flanks, that solemn green, that red which was both dark and bright, that transparent sapphire, that peach blossom, and that color of time-aged golden coins.

Then a voice startled Wayne. "Ah—of course—my shoes," he began to say, before realizing that it was not Uthman Khan who spoke.

The guardian was screeching, "O thou unbelieving dog, thou father and lover of pigs!"

He reached out a skinny hand, picked up the earthen jar and hurled it. Wayne and the *khan* recoiled. The vessel splattered to bits. The old man seized dried cakes of dung he collected for his cooking fire. He threw them at infidel and prince alike. He cursed the *khan,* saying, "Thou lover of infidels! Allah curse thee, Allah curse thy grandfather, Allah curse whoever curses not thy grandfather!"

When Mahmud was breathless and out of ammunition, the *khan* said, "He is old and pious. You must forgive him."

Wayne suddenly felt old and weary. His shoulders sagged as he went back toward the horses. This must indeed be a sacred

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place. when Mahmud could revile a prince and not be reproved. Any other man would have been cut down.

That night, stuffed with mutton stew and wishing he had brought a more powerful bug powder, Wayne lay in his room and pondered, "This fellow loves guns. Maybe if I asked the King of Iraq for a jackass battery or some machine guns to give the *khan,* I could bring up the subject . . ."

This was Persian territory, as nearly as it was anyone's but Uthman Khan's. But that made no difference to Wayne. His sleep was full of phrases to tempt the blunt *khan's* fancies . . .

The *khan* said, on the following day, "*Hakim,* my people will revere your name if you give them medicine."

Wayne answered, "There isn't much I can do. I brought only a first-aid kit for my servants and mule drivers. But I'll try."

FOR the first time in years, he laid his hands on a patient. After all, he told himself he had to humor these savages.

When he gave Adela Khanoum a dose of salts and told her to keep off her feet for a few days, he got an ironic pleasure out of her thanks; she kissed his hand. Mrs. Vice President back home would have paid five thousand bucks, if her doctor had been crazy enough to ask him for a consultation. Patients never approached Doctor Wayne.

He had enough humor to relish it. He looked up from his field kit, and saw a cat nursing a litter of scrawny kittens as she lay on a bale of *jild-al-faras*s "mare's hide." It was apricot pulp, pressed thin and dried and rolled up like a bolt of calico. With leathery bread, if often made a Kurdish breakfast.

He said to Uthman Khan, "Your Highness, tell your people not to let cats crawl all over the foodstuff. It's bad for the digestion, particularly when your cats prowl around in those alleys."

The *khan's* face lengthened, but a guest is a guest. "I shall mention it at once." He drew his pistol and fired a slug past the cat's ears. She jumped, and her kittens followed her.

Uthman Khan holstered the Browning automatic and added, apologetically, "We like cats, so I would not kill her. Cats are clean. The Prophet—on whom be peace and Allah's mercy—he loved them."

When Wayne finally spoke of the surface drainage that leaked from stables and cesspools into the city well, Uthman Khan's politeness was strained. "Our fathers lived this way, *hakim,*" he frigidly said.

But he remembered the courtesy due a guest, even an infidel, and made show of having sand strewn about the well coping.

That night, Wayne thought it was time to do something about it all. He wiped the mutton grease from his lips and fingers, and drained his little cup of syrupy tea. "Your Highness," he boldly began, "I have not told you why I came to Kurdistan."

The *khan* shrugged and lighted an American cigarette. "That is as God please. You are welcome. We do not ask."

"I collect rugs," Wayne said. "Rare and old pieces."

"God does what he will do," Uthman Khan tactfully replied; he was thinking that infidels are crazy. Who for example, wants an old rug? This man was doubtless very rich, and could afford new ones. Then he said, "Since that pleases you, *hakim,* be so good as to take this old one we sit on. There are also others, even more ragged and worn."

To anyone but Dr. Wayne, the gift would have been magnificent. It had been woven in Bijar. Its broad border was of black sheep's fleece, undyed. The medallion in the center was Persian, the ground was Herati; and the scarlet was like a lily petal, not a flat shade but a rippling color that lived and danced before the eye. Nowhere except in Kurdistan do dyemasters know how to make scarlet.

Wayne thanked Uthman Khan, and then went on, "Your Highness, name any sum you can count, and I will pay it. If

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you give me the carpet of the shrine of Imam Ayyub."

The *khan's* mustaches twitched. Finally he made his voice level. *"Hakim,* I see that you do not understand us. Mahmud, guardian of the shrine, cursed me for bringing you near it."

"Fifty thousand dollars," Wayne said. "If you do not like cash, I will buy machine guns. Cannons. Any weapons you wish."

"O man, you are a doctor. If you had served men well, you would be poor. You have served only the rich. Now that you have been our guest for three days, we will escort you to the border. Doubtless years will pass before we see you again, *hakim.*"

Wayne rose. A servant followed, carrying the rug on which Wayne had sat. And in the morning, tall horsemen escorted him to the border.

THE doctor, some days later, was glad when he saw the simmering plain of Mesopotamia, the barren crag and the old fortress of Tekrit, the broad Tigris winding muddily through hell. He had played and he had lost and he was weary.

There had been firing, one night, to make the muleteers howl, pray, and hide themselves in caves. Horsemen had clattered past; horsemen of the Hakkiari Kurds, circling the camp, then charging up a murderous slope.

"Another feud," Wayne told himself. "More sheep stealing."

He did not know that Uthman Khan's son, leading a raid, had sent his best riders out to be sure that the departing guest would not be harmed.

And now the mountaineers were returning. They filed into the firelight of Wayne's camp, tall and dusty and stern. The horses were spent, the men weary; two of the party were wounded, but they ignored this. As their leader addressed the interpreter, Wayne wondered why they had come out of the mountains after him.

Something was wrong. He could feel their wrath and their grief and their dispair. Their speech was brief, yet it seemed endless. Finally the interpreter made things clear.

"The *khan's* son was wounded in a raid. Go back with us and cure him."

"I must return to Bagdad," Wayne answered. "What is more, your *khan* gave me safe conduct."

The leader snorted. "That ended last night. Now you are no longer our guest." He drew his pistol. "You are going with us, and Shirkuh's life is on your head."

"See here," Wayne contended, "I didn't wound Shirkuh."

"Tell the *khan,*" was the answer.

"Where is Shirkuh?"

"They hurried him home, while some of us went after you."

This was once when a reputation was a dangerous thing. Wayne was soon beyond worrying about the unreasonable threat. His captors were taking shortcuts, and riding like madmen. When weariness finally made Wayne reel in the saddle, they tied him; and they left him tied, except when a horse fell and could not rise again.

There were no spare mounts left when the party crossed the trail that cut through the rimrock of the bowl-shaped valley. The haggard riders hustled Wayne to the drafty castle where Uthman Khan waited. Servants stood by with flaring torches.

"Hurry!" the *khan* said, and gestured toward the pallet of straw and sheepskins.

The torchbearers shifted, and Wayne saw his patient. What was left of Shirkuh dismayed him. Aside from bandages of turban shawls, they had done nothing for the wounded man; not when there was a world-famed *hakim* within reach. "Get the first-aid kit from my saddle bags," Wayne said, "and heat some water. Have someone find opium."

He had ridden so long that the floor seemed to gallop under his feet. But he managed to kneel and strip off Shirkuh's blood-drenched velvet jacket. All Wayne could do was to shake his head. There were bullets to extract, sword cuts to stitch; bits of leather and cloth and dirt contaminated each wound.

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"He's as good as dead!" Wayne's voice cracked. "It's a wonder he's still alive. Get out, all of you! I'll see what I can do."

But Uthman Khan did not leave. He came closer and drew his pistol. "I will watch you. Do not make any mistakes. If he does not recover, I fire. You brushed Death's hand from a king; do as much for my son."

Wayne had scarcely more than the simplest instruments and his skill. This was a hospital case, but the *khan* did not understand these things. Wayne wiped the sweat away from his forehead. "You're crazy! How can I cure him?"

"You cured a king."

"I—I—see here, you can't shoot me—"

"That is the law. You cursed my son, who had never before lost so many men in a raid. You were angry because I refused to sell the holy carpet. So you must cure him."

WAYNE knelt beside the muttering man. There was a moment of dizziness. For an insane moment, he wanted to laugh. Then he controlled himself, washed his hands, and set to work. For the first time in years, a patient had a personal meaning.

Hours passed. There was nothing to do but watch the wounded Shirkuh. Armed men came and went. They brought grilled mutton and bread and fruit, but Uthman Khan gestured, and they went away. He did not eat. He did not drink. He squatted there, rigid; his pistol must have wavered, during the hours that dragged on, but Wayne thought not.

The sun rose. The town was silent. If women went to the well, they did not chatter. Wayne's eyes glazed. Sometimes he took brandy, sometimes strong tea as he sat there, watching, nodding while death and the days mocked him.

But Shirkuh lived. Kurdish vitality, and not any man's skill, had saved the doctor's life. Wayne said to Uthman Khan, "Do you mean that you would have killed me?"

"Of course. That is our law."

"Killing a doctor who fails?"

"You don't understand. Our own doctors, no. But you are a foreigner. If you cause the loss of a life in this tribe, why then someone in your tribe must die. You are the only one of your people among us."

"But a native doctor, he'd have done as much damage."

Uthman Khan was patient, for he was happy and grateful; so he went on with the explanation: "It would not have been punishment, don't you see? But merely to reduce the strength of your tribe, in the way the strength of ours had been reduced. Now, if we killed a native doctor, for letting my son die, then we would only hurt ourselves, for we would be two weaker, instead of just one."

Wayne, however, saw a new chance of success. He sent a messenger to Mosul, with a radiogram saying that the doctor's return to New York would be indefinitely postponed. There was another message, this one to Bagdad. Wayne said to Uthman Khan, "I am asking the King of Iraq to send me something which will be a gift to you and your people."

"Guns?" The *khan's* deep-set eyes gleamed.

"No. Better than that. Wait and see."

During the intervening days, Wayne managed to make his peace with Muhmud. Barefooted, he was permitted to go within a yard of the arched entrance of Iman Ayyub's tomb. Old Mahmud may have misunderstood the awe in Wayne's face, and the wonder in his eyes. His seamed face became almost amiable, and he invited Wayne into the little leanto of brush and rock and turf.

There Wayne drank tea, ate bread and dried apricots and cheese. Mahmud said, finally, "I am sorry that Allah will cast you into hell to roast forever, with all the other infidels."

Uthman Khan translated this, though Wayne was beginning to pick up enough of the harsh Kurdish dialect to catch the drift.

Mahmud would not have long to live.

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No one knew how old he was, but his trembling hand and bleared eyes told their story. Wayne wondered who would follow as guardian of the tomb, sweeping its floor, whitewashing its walls, chanting verses of the Koran in its duskiness.

Wayne began riding again. He mounted the *khan's* best horses, and grooms respectfully followed him, lest on some long jaunt, a prowling member of an enemy tribe snipe the *hakim*. They took him down tortuous ravines, over deadly passes where only a mountain horse could go.

Men far older than Wayne could gallop day and night, wearing out one horse after another as they crossed Uthman Khan's territory from border to border. And Wayne, who had succeeded in everything he had tried, knew that he could finally do as well as any Kurdish rider. But it would take months before he could hope to snatch the holy carpet, and outrace the alarm.

ONE day the gift arrived from Bagdad. Camels and donkeys grunted under the weight of medicines and instruments, an operating table, sterilizers, everything needed for a small field hospital; between the King of Iraq and a Bagdad supply house, these things had been assembled.

Tall mountaineers, rifles slung over their shoulders, stalked solemnly through the town, pouring creosote into the corners and alleys which the women had cleaned up. Offal was burned or buried. The stables ceased breeding flies, and the butchers screened their stalls with netting, so that freshly cut meat would be red instead of black. And one section of a warehouse stuffed with hides and wool and grain became a dispensary and hospital.

"By Allah," Uthman Khan said, one morning, as women and children waited while Wayne set a sheepherder's broken leg, "I was wrong when I said that you had become rich, serving the rich and neglecting the poor."

"Some day," Wayne answered, "I must go back to my own people. By then, a few of you will know how to take my place. Just as I am learning to ride. From seeing and practice."

He had his own horses now, so that he could ride without getting an animal from the *khan's* stables. He had too many horses, in fact; they were gifts. And he began to wear the boots and baggy trousers, the vests embroidered by the wives of his patients; he became used to the conical cap and the massive turban of silken shawls.

The dogs now knew his scent, and ceased barking. No one thought twice, except to bless his name, when he rode by nights—sometimes with a midwife, to some far-off tribesman's hut. Half a dozen infant Kurds had been named "Wayne." They ceased calling him an infidel.

Thus, one night Wayne readily passed the sentries who crouched at the gate. The mountaineers were bundled in sheepskin coats. They looked up and saluted him. One muttered to his fellow, "By Allah, this man would be almost a saint, if he weren't an infidel . . ."

Ahead, Wayne saw the white cupola of the tomb. The moon had not yet risen, and his horse was dark chestnut. A wind whined as it polished the granite rimrock; it bit into the doctor's jacket, made his eyes water, and stung his face.

He had won a new color. Mountaineering had tightened his cheeks and bronzed them. He was young and supple again, and he flexed from the waist, easily, reins and weight helping his horse down the treacherous goat trail into the ravine.

Rocks clattered down into the gloom below, and splashed into the foaming stream that was little short of ice cold. Water broke against the horse's deep chest, foamed along his flanks; it drenched Wayne's red boots and went over the tops. But he no longer cared about wet feet.

Finally he dismounted and left his horse in a clump of junipers.

Soon he heard Mahmud. He did not like the sound of the old man's breathing. It was choked. There were vague rustlings as the guardian pitched and tossed on

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his pallet of straw and sheepskin. He might wake up any moment.

Wayne did not want to harm the old man, but it would be hard to fight him off, if fanatic fury drove him. For all Wayne's new honor with the Hakkiari Kurds, news of this attempt would cost him his life.

The far-off silvering of a high peak predicted moonrise. Already, there was a ghostly softening of the gloom, and the tomb was more than blank white. Wayne took another few paces. Inside, he could discern a vague shimmering, as if the holy carpet's nape caged and concentrated all that first moonglow.

A CRACKING twig made him whirl. There was Mahmud, white beard rippling; turban white and tunic white and ragged white pantaloons. Wayne could not speak. He stood there, hearing the guardian's choking breath. When would he start cursing and screeching?

Then Mahmud said, "Allah heard my prayers, O *hakim!* There were devils choking me, and my heart is not right. And lo, you came. There is no God but Allah, and—"

He crumpled. Wayne caught the skinny old fellow and carried him to the leanto. He fed the smouldering coals. He gave Mahmud brandy. Then he galloped crazily back to town for his kit.

Mahmud was unconscious when Wayne returned. At the gate, Wayne had said to the sentries, "O men! The guardian of the tomb is a dead man unless he remains quiet and undisturbed. Do not expect me in the morning, unless he is better."

The sentries gaped. One made as if to touch Wayne's sleeve. The other caught his hand, and both backed away a pace. One said, "By Allah, O *hakim,* thou knowest all things. We did not hear the old man cry out."

"Neither did I," Wayne brusquely said, riding on.

The men misunderstood this. They said to each other, *"Wallah,* he is a holy man, in his sleep Allah speaks to him."

Before midnight, Mahmud was out of danger. Perhaps Wayne had given him ten more years, perhaps twenty; perhaps a week—no man could say. Wayne was ceasing to take all the credit . . .

He laid out medicine, and said, "Take these as I explain, and do each day the things I tell you tonight. And Allah give you many years."

"You will be here early in the morning, *hakim?"*

"I may stay and watch all night. Now rest easy, Mahmud."

The old man was contented, and he went to sleep. Wayne sat there, frowning, until there was no doubt in his mind that Mahmud would survive.

He went to the door of the tomb. For a moment he heard the restive pawing of his horse, and the tinkle of curb chain. He stood there, drinking the rug with his eyes. For the first time, a man with shoes went into the shrine. Wayne's fingers tingled from the smoothness of the rug.

Then he withdrew his hand and shook his head. He muttered as he stumbled out, "Rats! Sending a patient a stiff bill is one thing. Looting him is another. Why'd he have to have that heart attack!"

When he went back to the guardian's leanto Wayne was thinking that once he got Mahmud well on his feet, it would be different. Then he'd be no patient . . .

BEFORE Mahmud had entirely lost his status as patient, the Hakkiari Kurds decided that the time for vengeance was at hand. Too many men had died in Shirkuh's raid. Though no one held it against the *khan's* heir, he had to redeem himself.

Wayne watched the riders leave. With tribal warfare threatening, he could not take the rug.

Uthman knew that his son's succession to the title depended on the esteem of the tribe, so he let the full responsibility of war weight Shirkuh's broad shoulders. Yet Uthman fretted, in private.

"You are in a way of speaking an infidel, O *hakim,"* he said, "but you are not

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as other men. You live to serve. You heal our bodies and our minds."

"That is by the grace of Allah," Wayne gravely replied. "What is on your mind?"

"My son, Shirkuh. You saved him once. But he goes into greater danger. A danger that a man must face."

"That you have faced," Wayne cut in. "And he can endure it."

The *khan* smiled. "You have no son."

This reminded Wayne of his old self-sufficiency, and his fame suddenly seemed futile. He said, "Shirkuh may be wounded, and there will be no *hakim* to attend him?"

"No man can change what Allah wills, but foresight and wisdom can make a man fit better into that which is written."

Before he could check his tongue, Wayne's new heart spoke. "I will go, Uthman," he said, and called for his horse. "I know the way he went."

With the heart of a thief, he had scouted all those trails. But as he left, that afternoon, he was telling himself, "This will keep it from being thievery. This will make the rug a fair fee."

Along the trail, outposts told him which way to go. And often, along the disputed ground, one added, "But while you rest, there is a bullet you could dig from such a one. We met the dogs, and they ran, but a wild shot found a mark."

These things broke his rest. Wayne's shoulders began to sag, and his eyes glazed; he clung to the high pommel of his saddle. The holy carpet danced before his eyes as he scaled goat trails. He had to move slowly. Stealthy raiders might lurk. He became too tired to be afraid.

Then the silence of high peaks began to whisper. Over the space of four centuries, Maqsoud of Kashan spoke to him, told him how the dyes of that great rug were made, how the patterns had been born, how the wool had been selected. Bit by bit, the forgotten wisdom gathered about Wayne.

HE NEVER knew when the shooting began. He did not know how he had returned the fire. He was wounded, and for the first time in his life, he had killed a man.

"I'm a Kurd," he said aloud. "I've become one of them. But I'm a doctor."

It was a scratch, no more, that drew blood from his ribs. Then there was a slug that had flattened against the hilt of his knife, knocking the breath out of him. He halted to confirm his suspicions. He heard men riding away. He had routed some of Shirkuh's enemies.

But he was a doctor. He heard a man groaning, very clearly now. The fellow was cursing, calling his companions sons of dogs for leaving him.

Perhaps he was cursing a doctor who rode on, ignoring suffering. For once, Wayne was not thinking of a fee. He was thinking of an oath he had taken, twenty years before. An oath he had forgotten.

Now that the first shock of the bullets wore off, Wayne felt the stab, the heat of blood trickling down his sheepskin coat. He wheeled his horse, and listened for a moment to the rocks that clattered down into the gaping blackness of a ravine. The wounded man was saying, *"La'nat 'ullah 'alaihim!"*

God's curse on the comrades who had abandoned him in their panic. There must be cowardly Kurds. None among the Hakkiari, but among the others. Wayne remembered what the blind singer had droned by the fire, when mutton smoked and made savory smells in the *khan's* castle.

My eyes were turned toward the solitude and the road,
And I rose and went to desert places.

That fellow in the darkness above was an enemy, but he had done what tradition demanded. And he would rise and go to a desert place if Wayne delayed.

So he retraced his difficult course. He was too tired to speak the guttural language clearly, and maybe the man would not understand the dialect; but the doctor called, "Wait, I'll be with you, O man!"

Then he saw the turban's white blotch

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in the gloom. He dismounted, unslung his kit. His legs were tricking him, and he stumbled once. He caught at the gnarled roots of a tree, then knelt slowly and bent over the groaning man.

A pistol blazed. Wayne saw the flame of it, but did not hear the sound, and did not choke from the fumes of sulphur that the black powder threw into his nostrils. He crumpled and a man laughed.

"O thou dog, thou thief with the heart of a thief!" At the sound of the shot, others came running. One caught the horse of the man they thought had come back to loot a fallen enemy. "The fool came to steal. What Hakkiari is not a fool?"

No Hakkiari would have fallen into that trap, unless he were young and reckless. Wayne did not know that his bullets had done no damage. The blaze of that muzzle-loading pistol spread; its color changed, and wove itself into patterns, the splendor of Maqsoud's last work.

Wayne did not feel hard hands strip off his embroidered vest, his sheepskin jacket, his red boots; the conical cap, the silken shawl wound in many turns. They left him naked on the cold rock, and later at their guard fire, they divided the loot.

"*Wallah,*" they said, "We have trapped a kinsman of Uthman Khan! Look at this dagger. Look at this pistol."

In the morning, Shirkuh's patrols found Wayne before the scavengers had settled. They did not bury him under a cairn of rocks, as is the custom.

"God, by God, by the One True God!" the *khan's* son swore, "this was a holy man. He came to treat our wounds, and they killed him. We will take him to Imam Ayyub's tomb. We will bury him beside the Imam. *Wallah,* we will then have two saints to intercede with us."

This was done, and Wayne shared the holy carpet with a Moslem saint.

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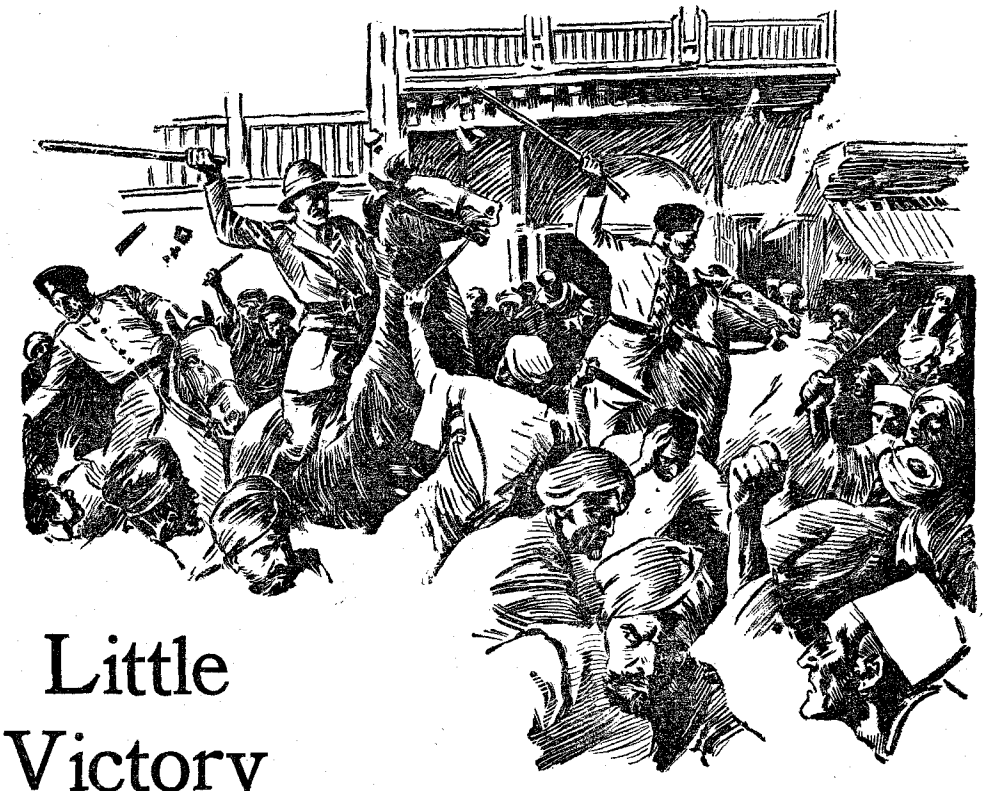

Little Victory

There was a rough-house in the bazaar; three troop horses hamstrung and eight troopers hurt

Take a country like India, where snakes go to sleep in your shoe and bath salts turn up in the curry. Reform comes in small doses, with plenty of soda; but what you get tastes good

By JOHN KENT

WHEN Dale Hampton came to India she felt an immediate urge to reform that country the moment she landed. This is entirely natural in most newcomers who are worth their salt (and Dale was worth all the salt in the Atlantic Ocean which she had so recently crossed): because there is always room for improvement anywhere; but there is more than ample scope in Hindustan.

That she failed, is hardly to be wondered at. She failed in good company: Clive, John Nicholson, Lord Roberts and Gandhi had each failed before her. Yet each had contributed something in the course of his efforts at reformation; and it stands to Dale's credit that her contribution was the making of a man from the raw material which was Larry Garnett of the Indian Police.

And if this success was entirely incidental and unpremeditated, this in no way detracts from her achievement.

Dale had married Major Tim Hampton when that officer was visiting friends in New York. He was a squadron commander in the Fiftieth Deccani Lancers and that gave him a certain glamor. So Dale decided to exchange the East Fifties for the East Indies.

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She arrived at the upcountry station of Chandar Serrai (having travelled via London and Paris) when the rains were overdue in breaking.

Now if you transplant a girl from New York City to Chandar Serrai, it's reasonable to expect trouble: even such a girl as Dale, who possessed courage and the saving grace of humor. For not the least of India's many problems is its minor discomforts. There are so many of them and they all appear at once to greet you on arrival.

The inevitable effect of this is that your views are thrown out of focus: the objects in the foreground bulk so large that they obscure your view of the background, and from blaming the country for its discomforts you begin to turn your dissatisfaction to the Government of India.

This doesn't really matter, for most governments are convenient safety valves for the dissatisfied anyway, and everything usually works out eventually according to plan.

After a year of two you are absorbed into the machinery and resentment turns to sympathy and finally to co-operation, until, at the end of your service, you leave the country cut to much the same pattern as your predecessors and as an example (or possibly a warning) to those who follow after.

IN DALE'S case, unfortunately, this process was complicated by several factors. The transition had been too abrupt. She had read all she could about India before she arrived there and had already formed very decided views. And she met Larry Garnett just when she was experiencing that critical period of indecision which comes when facts begin to throw a new light on the written word.

In addition, the minor discomforts of India were fresh upon her when she met him.

For Dale, on her arrival, had had a good look at her new home and expressed the conviction that India wasn't so hot. This, although climatically inaccurate (the thermometer in the shade of the verandah registered one hundred and twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit) was a perfectly normal opinion for a fresh arrival in the remoter parts of India.

The guidebooks of that country usually omit all reference to dust, sandfly and malarial fever, so you don't find Chandar Serrai and similar stations mentioned in any of them.

Tim Hampton, who'd spent fifteen years in the East, saw nothing unusual about the place. He was rather surprised at Dale's bewilderment. He didn't stop to compare his own feelings on first seeing the New York skyline with Dale's even deeper emotion on first seeing Chandar Serrai.

He said cheerfully: "We shan't be here long, darling. This is only a three-year station. After that we'll be moved to Meerut or Rawal Pindi." And Dale, doing her best, said that sounded swell. She was still murmuring "only three years" when she went off to inspect the gray-and-white plaster bungalow which would be her home for that brief period.

She inquired tentatively about air conditioning and refrigeration but was told that neither had reached Chandar Serrai yet. However, Tim pointed proudly to the heavy beam which flapped a tattered strip of matting across the dinner table and provided puffs of tepid air, and explained that it was a punkah.

"How does that fool thing work?" Dale asked, trying to take an interest. And Tim led her to a window from which she could see the punkah coolie lying on his back in the dust of the compound, languidly waving one leg in the air while his hands explored diligently for the more intimate parasitical visitants. A leather thong attached to his toe passed through a hole in the wall and thence to the punkah beam, thus providing the alleged breeze in the dining room.

Dale just said, "Oh," and felt sure she wasn't going to like this country at all. And it was about then that she began subconsciously to blame Tim for its many

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discomforts. But this, of course, was only the beginning.

She had a sudden yearning to unpack. There would be something vaguely comforting in getting her dresses and belongings out of the tin uniform cases and wooden crates piled in the bedroom. Maybe she'd feel less homesick if she handled them.

In fact, she almost fondled the many bottles and toilet preparations she took from the first box she opened. The scent of gardenia and the masterpieces of Chanel and Guerlain swept the acrid taste of dust from her mouth and the sickly smell of decaying vegetation from her nostrils. Regretfully she decided to put them away in the wall closet in the bathroom.

But she discovered there wasn't any wall closet: in fact, you could almost say there wasn't any bathroom—not as Dale knew bathrooms, anyway.

SHE assumed that the zinc tub in the middle of the mud-walled cupboard off her bedroom meant something. There was an earthenware water container beside it and a small wooden grating on the floor. That, apart from a hole in the wall to let the water run out when you tipped it out of the tub, comprised the furniture of the bathroom.

Then she discovered a wooden shelf along one wall and she started to arrange her bottles and jars along that. Her *ayah,* the smiling native girl Tim had engaged as her personal maid, watched her with interest.

She heard Tim in the bedroom and called out: "I thought the British went in for understatement? I suppose you wouldn't include 'the glamor of the East' in that category?"

A light wind got up and rattled the dusty leaves of the neem tree in the compound. It brought with it a sample of the odors of the bazaar: a blending of rancid butter, musk, curry powder, goats, and other less pleasing ingredients. Dale added: "But Kipling's 'Spicy, garlic smells' was understatement all right."

Tim said, "By the way, you want to be careful in that bathroom, dear. I mean, have a good look round before you get in the bath."

Dale asked curiously: "Why?" She thought she'd seen all she wanted to see.

"Cobra," said Tim. "They come in through that hole and coil round the water *chatti* when they want to cool themselves."

Dale came out of the bathroom. "Cobra?" she said. "Those snakes with hoods? That'll be fun. I don't think I'll bathe. It'd be kind of mean to disturb them while they're getting nice and cool."

Then Dale noticed the puzzled look in Tim's eyes and she laughed. "Cheer up, honey," she said, "I can take it. Tell me the worst: these cobra don't get into the beds to warm themselves, do they?"

Tim was vastly relieved to see her smile. "Well," he comforted, "they do, but they're more or less safe then. You see, the weight of the bed-clothes prevents them from rearing up to strike. They can't drive their fangs in unless they get a third of their bodies off the ground, so they can't inject their venom. And while we're talking about snakes, it's a good tip to knock your shoes on the ground before putting them on."

"Do cobras get into shoes?"

"Oh, no; but the kraits do. They're much smaller but rather more deadly than cobra. But they only do it to hide themselves. The average snake is always more terrified of you than you are of it."

"I can't believe *that,*" said Dale. "Besides, the snake I meet might be above the average. Still, I'll remember about kraits. Thanks a lot. And now I think we might give ourselves a drink unless some of these snakes have got into the alcohol to pickle themselves."

They left the *ayah* to finish unpacking and went out together to the verandah.

But things didn't get really serious until the affair of the well.

LARRY GARNETT rode over to call the morning that came to a head, and he was quick to realize that if he'd deliberately timed that call he couldn't

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have chosen a better moment. And if his first thought on seeing Dale was, whoops, another of 'em, it only proves that Larry was incapable of taking anything seriously.

For Dale was the last sort of person to inspire that kind of thought, and particularly so in Chandar Serrai, where even ordinary girls were at a premium.

Tim seemed embarrassed when he presented Larry to Dale, so it wasn't difficult for Larry, with more superficial knowledge of women than Tim was ever likely to acquire, to guess he had interrupted a family row.

"You been on duty at that perishing well?" he asked, noticing the automatic pistol strapped to Tim's Sam Browne belt.

Tim scowled at him and Larry knew he'd accidentally hit on the cause of the quarrel. "Have much trouble?" he asked casually. And Tim said they'd had a bit and tried to change the subject.

"Can't think why they have to mount an armed guard there," Larry said. He saw Dale's eyes brighten and added, "I noticed they'd got a couple of machine guns with 'em. Seems unnecessary to me."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," Dale said. "I can't help feeling . . ."

Tim spoke brusquely. "We've had to put a picket on that well because it's teeming with cholera bacilli. Three doctors, two of them Indians, have reported that if water is drawn from it the whole bazaar will be down with cholera inside three days. But the bazaar people say they've drawn water from that well since the year one and they're going to continue the process in spite of cholera.

"So, for their own sake, they have to be prevented from drinking from it; there's plenty of water available from the other wells which aren't infected. That's the situation."

"But I don't understand," said Dale. She appealed to Larry. "Do you know much about India?" she asked.

"Well, I'm in the Indian Police and I've been here three years, and candidly, Mrs. Hampton, I'm not a believer in armed force." He might have added, "I'm talkink rank heresy but I've got a very good reason for that." After all, Dale was a very good reason for anything.

"There," she said triumphantly. "You see, Tim, neither Mr. Garnett nor I can see the need for all this—this display. Why don't you try explaining to the crowd?"

"I did," said Tim, thinking of the half bottle which had missed him by an inch and cut short the explanation.

"And why the machine guns?" Dale went on relentlessly.

"Because a display of force is better than an encouraging weakness. Can't you see, dear, that we're trying to save life? First by stopping them from drinking that water and second by showing the guns and stopping them from attacking us and driving us to employ force against them? And you, Garnett; I should have thought . . ."

"I'm a great believer in arbitration," Garnett proclaimed smugly. "The policy of appeasement. The umbrella is mightier than the sword and all that."

"I WOULDN'T know about that," Dale said. "But after all, my small domestic problems are a kind of reflection of the greater affairs of this country. Take this morning; I went into the kitchen—"

"That was unwise," Tim smiled, glad to talk of something else. "The wise housewife never does that. It's asking for trouble."

"There you are. At once you state the Government policy of avoiding trouble. Well, I'll admit I found plenty . . . the place was just filthy. I've never seen such mess. But I didn't go get a gun and shoot the cook, Tim. I just explained to him very gently that I had to fire him on account of the state he'd got things in and I gave him fifty rupees as a gift . . ."

"So that's why I saw him in the bazaar, drunk at eleven o'clock this morning," Tim murmured, but Dale ignored him.

"And he took it darn well," she went on. Even Larry had to protest.

"They usually take fifty rupees darn well," he said.

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"Being fired—not the money, I mean. Anyway, a new cook arrived right away and now everything out there is swell. So you see what I mean about dealing with these people?" she concluded.

"Absolutely," said Larry, trying not to catch Tim's eye. "We ought to get together: not rule with a rod of iron." But when Tim spoke there was a note of seriousness in his voice.

"Listen, honey," he said. "You want to be a bit careful with these servants. They're not a very good type up here and they're inclined to be revengeful. I've known cases where they've put powdered glass and worse in the food just because of some simple rebuke or because someone's given 'em ten rupees for doing it. So I think I'll go and interview this new man . . ."

"All you're looking for is an excuse to use a gun," said Dale. "It's the old idea of government from the gun muzzle. You just leave the new cook alone. A little more sympathy and a little less brutality —surely it's desirable?"

"The desirable isn't always attainable," said Tim, thinking of his work.

"How true," said Larry, thinking of Dale.

"You're up against a big proposition," Tim went on patiently.

"Child marriage . . ." Dale began, speaking from memory as she warmed to her theme.

"It took us over a hundred years to abolish *suttee*, the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres, and it'll probably take us as long to alter certain other customs, even if we ever manage to alter them. Most of them are older than our own civilization, anyhow.

"You've just got to keep on keeping on, and hoping for results that are very slow in coming. It isn't lack of sympathy on either side. It's just—a big proposition," he ended lamely. "This trouble over the well is a pretty good example. It's the same with drainage and sanitation . . ."

"And yet I can clear up my kitchen peacefully while, if you'd handled it, you'd probably have taken the place apart," Dale suggested.

"Of course, sacking a cook and dealing with an armed mob are slightly different, but it's the same principle: it's the way you do it," Larry agreed. "There's an awful lot in what your wife says." Then he added hastily: "I think I'll be getting along now. I shall be busy if anything starts in the bazaar—soothing 'em."

When he'd gone, Tim said, "He's very young. He can't seem to take things seriously yet, and his superiors in the Police are getting restive. He doesn't seem keen enough to get a grip on his job; always casual . . ."

"Maybe," suggested Dale the romanticist, "there's a woman in his life."

Tim laughed shortly. "Not Larry. He's just a tepid philanderer. No, it wants an emergency to make a man of him."

"Emergency—or a woman," said Dale.

"Well, some sort of violent experience," Tim smiled. Then he glanced down at her. "This another theory?" he asked.

"Not one I propose putting into practice," she assured him. And it says much for their trust in each other that neither seriously visualized the woman who would make a man of Larry Garnett, although Larry himself was already suffering from clearly defined visions on that subject.

DALE found Larry a great comfort during the days which followed. He was so understanding. Tim was away a lot on duty but Larry could usually manage to get an hour or two off around cocktail time, although he admitted it was difficult now that Habbi Bula, a minor political leader, had taken up his quarters at Chandar Serrai.

He said Habbi Bula was misguided; sincere in his way, but apt to be a little thoughtless. It was as well Dale didn't know the things Larry said in the privacy of his office, because she became quite interested in the movements of this latest reformer.

Larry, secretly praying the gods would provide sufficient evidence to make the

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arrest of the reformer worth while, told her that, very regretfully of course, he might have to take the man into custody, "more for his own sake than because he was dangerous."

"The trouble is," he explained, "that half the population support him and the other half are violently against him. By playing one against the other, he manages to embarrass us without coming into direct opposition to us. He leaves us in the unenviable position of peacemakers—at our own risk."

Dale listened attentively. It was such a change to get detailed explanation like this; Tim always accepted things on their face value without troubling to explain the complications. When she'd mentioned Habbi Bula to him, for example, he'd just smiled and said:

"That old rascal has visited every Government prison from Alipore to the Andaman Islands. I'm sorry he's turned up here; he's a bit of a stormy petrel."

And he had posted an armed orderly permanently on duty at the bungalow, which Dale had faintly resented. It was the same old story of armed force.

But Larry was so understanding. His knowledge of native customs, architecture, and art was inexhaustible. Occasionally she wondered if the Indians went in for etchings at all, but she banished the thought: Larry was always the very soul of punctiliousness, and well . . . Tim was on duty quite a lot these days.

Not that she gave Larry the slightest encouragement. That, had she known it, was why he was so punctilious. Normally, it wasn't his long suit.

Another thing which interested her about him was his way of appealing to her when he was in trouble about anything, though she didn't realize that he spent a good deal of his spare time inventing troubles over which to appeal.

For up to now, women had been merely fun with Larry. Nice clean fun, or just fun, but never anything more enthralling. But when he was with Dale, it was somehow different.

There was, for example, her obvious detestation of India. Maybe she'd be glad to escape . . . So, when next they met on the Club verandah, Larry's trouble took the form of his inability to understand women and his lack of attraction for them. This is a pretty ancient gambit, but then he was very young.

Dale, however, proved less sympathetic than expected. "You?" she scoffed. "Why, you've never been in love; that's what's wrong with you."

Larry pondered this accusation. It was true enough up to a point. But he felt he was rapidly approaching that point.

"Never," he admitted. "That is, till . . ."

"By the way," Dale cut in swiftly, "snakes don't thrive on toilet preparations, do they?"

Larry, although slightly dashed by this change of ground, decided to persevere. He reached for her hand.

"I—I don't quite get you," he queried. Dale withdrew her hand.

"And you never will," she assured him.

"I'm sorry," said Larry. It was more a statement of fact than an apology.

But Dale had remembered her own prophecy about a woman or an emergency in regard to Larry and she hadn't the faintest intention of being cast for either. She repeated calmly: "About those snakes; they don't eat face creams and that sort of thing, do they?"

"Of course not. Why?" asked Larry, accepting the situation.

"Well, mine seem to be disappearing rather quickly and I just wondered."

"That's the servants," he told her. "They love these things. Always helping themselves. Your *ayah* . . ."

"My *ayah* is perfectly honest; she wouldn't touch a thing," Dale flared. "You're like all the rest of them, you must blame the native. It makes me mad."

Larry protested he'd meant nothing derogatory—it was a kind of habit with the servants. But Dale wouldn't be mollified and she dismissed him sooner after that. He was annoyed at his slip: he felt he was losing his technique. And Dale was equally

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annoyed, for she had no time for that sort of technique anyhow.

But if understanding was beginning to dawn on Dale, love was coming rapidly to Larry Garnett. And, as is frequently the case, it was coming just when he knew it was no good.

SOON after he had gone, Tim called Dale from the cavalry lines to say he'd been ordered out on duty and would be late. There was more trouble in the bazaar and he had to go down there with his squadron.

"It's that blighter Habbi Bula," he said. "He's managed to start a first class communal riot. I'm sending a *risaldar* and three *sowars* up to the bungalow."

"What are they?" Dale asked suspiciously. "More snakes?"

Tim laughed. "A sergeant and three troopers," he translated. "They'll mount a sentry at the gate."

"Is that necessary?" Dale asked; and Tim said it was precautionary.

"Is there any danger?" she demanded. "I mean, for you?"

"Not the least," he lied cheerfully. "Only a matter of keeping the two rival factions apart and preventing them from cutting each other's throats. I'll be home when it's all calmed down. Don't wait up for me, dear . . ."

The beating of drums and gongs from the direction of the bazaar drowned his parting words. It sounded ominous. Dale felt relieved when the guard Tim had ordered marched into the compound five minutes later.

When the *ayah* announced the bath was ready, Dale tried to dismiss the faint air of foreboding the sight of the armed sentry at the gate had created.

But as she struggled to make herself comfortable in the abominable zinc tub, she began to wonder if, after all, these problems of India and of those who served there were as simple as she had at first suspected. Maybe they were more complicated than just firing a cook for having a dirty kitchen.

And maybe this Habbi Bula wasn't so much a reformer as an agitator. Unscrupulous political leaders had an easy weapon when they could work religious fervor up to flash point, as Habbi Bula seemed to be doing. Of course, reason and toleration should prevail, but . . .

Her eyes ranged along the shelf on which her beloved toilet preparations were displayed; those last links with civilization which meant so much to her. She sat up as quickly as the tub would permit. Most of the jars were now half empty and some of the bottles were missing. She forgot about reason and toleration and called sharply for the *ayah*. Perhaps Larry had been right.

And when the *ayah* came to the door wearing a look of injured innocence and wafting a strong perfume of gardenia, Dale said things to her which were hardly in keeping with her theories. The *ayah* fled. Dale could hear her complaining bitterly in the kitchen across the compound.

When she had dressed, Dale, with a determined tilt to her firm chin, set out for the kitchen. She'd remembered some more things she wanted to tell the *ayah*.

She arrived unexpectedly, which was unfortunate for the new cook. Dale stood speechless at the sight of the cook anointing his beard with the most expensive product of Messrs. Lord and Taylor.

Then speechlessness passed and she started being profoundly unsympathetic to the Indian outlook. Indeed, she became so engrossed in contradicting her previously held views that she failed to notice the scowls on the faces of the servants around her.

She never knew how lucky it was that Larry Garnett suddenly appeared in the doorway.

He took in the situation and asked, "Having trouble, Dale?"

Dale blushed. Her remarks had been scarcely compatible with the opinions they had so frequently shared.

"I'll say I'm having trouble," she admitted.

Larry glanced at the assembled servants.

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"Want 'em cleared out?" he asked. Dale nodded. She rather admired the parade rasp in Larry's voice when he turned on the men. And she was pleased to see the alacrity with which they obeyed his brief commands. She'd have been surprised and probably shocked if she'd been able to understand the things Larry had said.

WHEN the men had gone, she looked at Larry thoughtfully. "I'm very grateful," she began. Then she noticed the lines about his mouth and the drawn look in his eyes.

"You been having trouble too?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing much. Thought I'd look in and make sure you were all right as I happened to be this way. There's a rough-house going on in the bazaar, though. Three troop horses hamstrung and eight troopers in hospital already."

He hadn't meant to say that, but he was tired. "Of course, if only they'd get the ringleaders aside and have a round-table conference," he added, hastily.

"Don't be a fool," Dale retorted. "Tim was perfectly right in all he said. How is Tim? Have you seen him? Is he all right?"

"So far. I'm only hoping he'll run across Habbi Bula, but I expect Mr. Bula is keeping well away from the trouble now he's managed to get it going."

"And why d'you want Tim to meet him?" Dale asked dangerously.

"Old scores to settle. Habbi Bula swore to get Tim when your husband captured him near the frontier and had him sent to the Andaman Islands for his last stretch. But if they meet, I'd put my money on Tim every time."

"You mean Habbi Bula has a personal grudge against Tim? Why didn't you tell me before? And why didn't Tim tell me? Say, what are you doing here, anyway? Why aren't you in the bazaar where the fighting is?"

"I'm just going, Dale," Larry assured her. "But you seemed to be a bit rattled . . ."

Dale laughed suddenly. "Maybe I was," she admitted. "Now you run along and look after Tim for me."

"Sure you'll be all right? I mean, what about dinner? Can you cook a curry?" He glanced at the table where all the ingredients for curry were set out.

"No," said Dale. "But I've got a chicken and plenty of corn on the cob; the only two civilized things this darn country produces. I'll get a dinner that'll surprise Tim when he gets back. A dinner worthy of him."

She started to clear the table. Suddenly she paused. "Well, I'll be—" she began. She was examining a packet she had picked up. Then she handed it to Larry and said:

"This is the craziest country; just take a look at that. My brilliantine on the cook's beard, my perfume on the *ayah*, and now to beat everything, my bath salts in the curry! I'm going to write a book about this place that'll surprise the world. And now, Larry, you get going. I shall be busy, and I want you to keep an eye on Tim for me."

Larry wished her goodnight. And perhaps there was more genuine affection in his voice when he spoke that familiar sentence than there had been at any time since he'd met her. As he walked away, he tried to whistle. But it wasn't much of a success.

Dale set to work on the chicken and corn. She paused to screen the door from the rays of the setting sun. The tumult in the bazaar had died. The evening breeze brought an odor of burning pine wood; far down the path, a man was singing a native love song; and from the minaret of the mosque above the bazaar, the Azam began the evening call to prayer:

"*Allahu Akbar! Ashadu an la ilaha illa'llah . . .*" "There is no God but God".

She drew a deep breath; this India was creeping up on her. And then she heard the clatter of Tim and his troopers returning and she ran to meet him.

LARRY watched her from the side gate. He turned away wearily; it seemed like just another lost opportunity. Every-

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thing he tried went wrong somehow. His job, Dale . . .

But he was rather proud of himself; Dale had never noticed that his collar-bone had been broken by a tile, deftly dropped from a roof in the bazaar. She'd been so worried, it hadn't seemed fair to appeal to her in his latest trouble.

That had gone wrong too: he was left with nothing—nothing except a little packet of bath-salts which Dale had rescued from the curry and which he had surreptitiously slipped into his pocket as a memento.

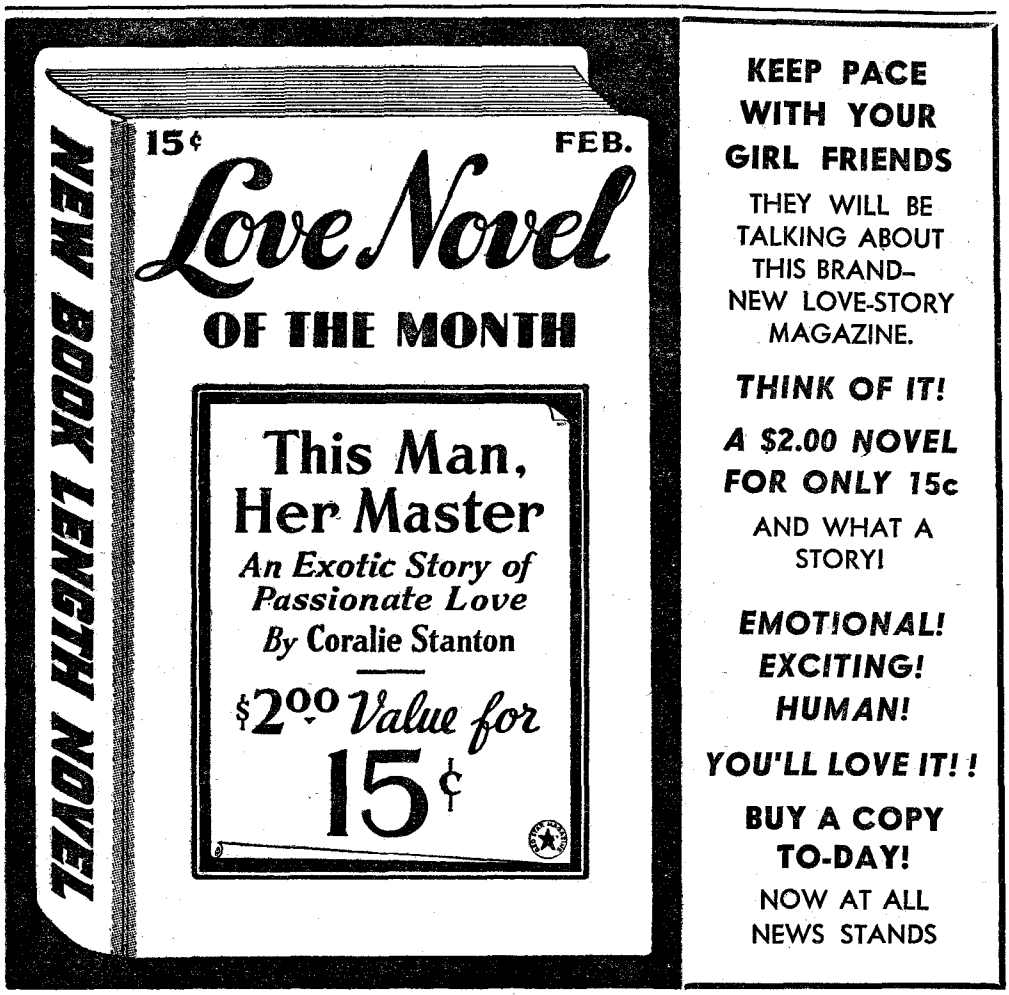
Absently he raised it so that he might savour the perfume Dale always used. Then he paused, and when he spoke to the Police *havildar* at his side, his voice had taken on a new note of authority.

"Arrest the cook who left here about fifteen minutes ago," he ordered. "Find out who put him in the job and paid him for his work. I know the answers to both, and as soon as you bring me confirmation, we'll go ahead and arrest Habbi Bula for incitement to murder. That charge will do till we can collect more evidence against him."

He took a crystal of Dale's "bath-salts" from the packet and put it on his tongue.

"White arsenic," he murmured. "I thought I was right."

And as he went on his way, he found he was able to whistle quite successfully.



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Rawhide Road

By BENNETT FOSTER

CHAPTER XXV

SMALL AND STINGY GUN

WHEN men are in camp there is little that they can keep hidden from one another. Thad Breathea, Brick Mahoney, Silk Gerald, and Curly Winters had been camping for two weeks. They were across the Pecos, in the rough country along the Canadian, and still Thad kept his secret.

Why he had kept it to himself he did not know; why he should continue to keep it, was a question. But for two weeks Thad had secreted the little "stingy gun," the thirty-two caliber Smith & Wesson that Heibert had called a lemon squeezer. During the day it rode in Thad's waistband under his shirt, and at night it was close beside his hand when he turned in. His belt gun swung at his hip, plain for all to see, but the little Smith & Wesson stayed out of sight.

The two weeks had been easy. The food supply had been replenished once. Before they crossed the Canadian, Brick and Silk Gerald—Brick because he had the best Spanish—rode into a little native *placita,* and from the storekeeper there bought tobacco and coffee, the two essentials that were getting low. When they returned, Brick was chuckling. The storekeeper had a daughter and Brick had flirted outrageously with the girl.

The trip so far had been leisurely. There were days when they stretched out and hit the ball, forty or fifty miles lying behind them when night came. There were other days when they stayed in camp and let the horses rest, not moving save to cook or change to a more comfortable position. But they were moving steadily north, and Brick was regaining his strength, growing red from the sun again, brighter eyed.

Thad watched Brick and he watched the others. He was happy to see Brick improve so rapidly, and gradually his suspicion of Curly and Silk was lulled. They were hearty and cheerful and, so Thad came to believe, real friends of Brick.

But on the night they made camp north of the Red River, Thad was tense. That day, following the crossing of the river, Thad had seen a little bunch of cattle. Two of the cows were branded Lazy 5. The brand in itself was enough to put Thad on edge.

The first installment of this five-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for December 16

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They made camp in a rincon among the rough breaks that led down to the river, hobbling the horses, spreading down the beds, cutting wood and building a little fire. Thad, his belt gun laid aside, took the ax and cut enough wood for the night and morning. Returning with the wood, he scarcely noticed that Silk and Curly abruptly ceased their earnest, low-voiced conversation when they caught sight of him.

Brick, growing more handy daily with his single arm, fell to work cooking, and Curly and Silk looked after the horses. After the sun was gone, they gathered about the fire and ate the salt pork, the biscuits, the canned corn, and drank the coffee that Brick had prepared. Then, with water from the little spring, the dishes were washed and the men relaxed. Brick and Thad were side by side upon Brick's bed. Curly was at the fire and Silk but a short distance from him.

"Another week will see us where we want to go," Brick announced, stretching lazily and taking from his mouth the cigarette that Thad had rolled for him. "That right, Silk?"

Silk looked at Brick and then at Curly. It was Curly who answered Brick.

"We're far enough now," Curly said bluntly.

Brick sat up. He was unarmed, having placed his belt and gun on his saddle while he cooked supper. Thad's belt gun too was on his saddle. He stayed on the bed, one leg doubled under him, the other stretched out.

"What do you mean?" Brick demanded, looking at Curly.

"We've come far enough," Curly repeated. "Silk an' me have."

"But we're goin' to Gato," Brick expostulated. "We ain't—"

"You ain't goin' to Gato," Silk told him, his voice hoarse and a little strained. "None of us are. It would take an army to get that payroll."

"Then why—?" Brick began. He did not finish the sentence; he stopped, his mouth opened and his eyes wide.

SILK was sitting cross-legged close by the fire, his gun drawn and its muzzle trained squarely on Brick. Curly, balancing on wide-spread legs, had also drawn his gun and was covering Thad.

"Yo're fixin' to kill us?" Brick demanded, incredulity in his voice.

"That's right," Silk glanced toward Curly and then looked back to Brick again. "That's right, Brick."

"But why?"

Silk grinned mirthlessly. "I figure to make a little money on you," he answered levelly.

"Kettleman?" Brick was staring straight at Silk. On the bed Thad sat numb, incapable of any movement.

Silk shook his head. "This is another deal, Brick. We'd of let you in on it but yo're so damned stuck on yore dogie kid you wouldn't of listened. A fellow named Ben Prince is payin' us for this. We collect on you an' the kid."

Ben Prince! Thad straightened. Some of the shock was leaving him, his mind was functioning normally once more. Ben Prince was Krespin's foreman. Thad looked at Brick, moving his eyes without turning his head. Brick had straightened until he sat erect. Brick's saddle and his belted gun were eight feet away. Thad could see the little beads of sweat forming on Brick's forehead.

"You see," Silk drawled, and incredibly there seemed to be amusement in his voice, "the kid has got a claim on an estate that Prince is interested in. It's worth a thousand dollars to Prince an' Krespin to have the kid dead."

Brick's voice was low and hoarse. "Then you tolled us up here to kill us?" he said. "That was all a lie about the payroll?"

Silk's smile broadened. "Sure," he agreed cheerfuly. "We got you up here where we could show you to Prince, an' collect. We had to have proof."

"Let Brick go." Thad did not realize for an instant that he had spoken, did not recognize his own voice, it was so hoarse and strained. "It's me that you want, not Brick."

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"An' have Brick come back at us?" Silk queried gently, not shifting his eyes. "Not much, kid. It'll be both of you."

"Get on with it then," Curly said. "You goin' to talk all night? Get on with it, Silk."

"There's no hurry," Silk purred. "I want this redhead to know what's comin'. You damned fool!" He seemed to throw the words at Brick now, "you thought that we'd come to you because you had brains! You thought we needed you to pull a little job. I ain't forgot the way you lorded it around after we went back to Las Flores. I ain't forgot how you called us cowards an' made us go back an' get that kid out of jail.

"Now you're goin' to find out! I'm goin' to shoot you in the guts an' watch you kick!" The ferocity in Silk's voice made Thad flinch. As he moved, the little stingy gun, forgotten until that moment, nudged him in the stomach with its butt.

"Why don't you beg?" Silk snarled. "Why don't you crawl, Brick? Mebbe we'd let you off an' just take the kid if you begged."

"Cut it out, Silk!" Curly said harshly. "Damn you, cut it out! Get done with it."

"You gettin' yellow, Curly?" Silk snarled. "If you are—"

Silk's gun was coming up; Thad could see the slow movement. Brick had tensed. Brick's single hand was pushed against the ground and Thad could see Brick's muscles bunch. Brick was going to throw himself toward the holstered gun that lay across his saddle, and go out fighting.

THAD did not realize that he moved. The long, rawhide muscles of his body tensed and snapped into action, seemingly without volition. Curly, momentarily diverted by Silk's savagery, was not ready for that movement.

It happened in a fraction of a second, between breaths; Thad Breathea threw himself back on the bedding and his hand snatched the little thirty-two Smith & Wesson from his waistband.

The roar of Curly's laggard shot and the smack of the bullet through the air above Thad's prone body drowned out the spiteful crack of the thirty-two. Thad fired straight down the length of his body toward the head of the seated man, and Silk Gerald, his gun half-lifted, paused and then dropped the weapon from his hand. Thad had not tried for Curly, had disregarded the gun that menaced his own life.

On Silk's face there was an expression of blank incredulity; then, still cross-legged, he bent forward, and as he fell, Thad could see that just between Silk's eyes, squarely centered, there was a small black hole.

For an instant Thad did not move. Then he rolled, coming up as he completed the movement, thrusting himself from the bed. Brick sprawled along the ground, his hand snatching at the heavy gun on his saddle. Thad snapped a shot at Curly but missed, and Curly, all his mind fixed upon Thad, confused by the suddenness of the action, fired at Thad, the shot narrowly missing its target.

It was Brick Mahoney who accounted for Curly Winters. Brick, sprawled on the hard earth, his big Colt in his hand, thumbed hammer and fingered trigger twice, so swiftly that the two shots blended into one crashing roar. Curly, hard hit above the belt buckle and in the chest, crashed back to fall full length beside the fire.

Thad scrambled up. Brick too gained his feet. For perhaps a full second they stood, each man swaying, and then Brick ran toward Thad and threw his arm about the lad's shoulders.

"Kid," he said, his voice choked, "kid! Are you all right?"

Very slowly Thad answered, his voice low. "I'm all right, Brick. Did you . . . did they—"

Brick turned from Thad. Suddenly, then, all the fury he held came into his face. Once more his arm lifted. His tense thumb held back the hammer of the Colt as he swung toward Curly.

Thad caught the extended arm. "No,

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Brick!" he commanded. Slowly Brick's arm came down.

For a time he stood so, panting as though from some overwhelming exertion. Thad, too, found that his breath was short, that his heart was pounding suffocatingly. Then Brick moved, crossing to where Silk Gerald lay toppled forward over his crossed legs, his position as grotesque as that of a floppy rag doll.

Brick touched Silk with his boot toe and Silk toppled down, falling over upon his back so that his lifeless eyes peered up at the black sky. Brick looked at Silk for a long minute and then, turning abruptly, he moved toward Curly. Curly stirred. Instantly Brick's gun came up, but a moment afterward, looking down at the man, he lowered the weapon again.

Together Brick and Thad knelt down beside the wounded man. Curly's agonized eyes were fixed intently upon Brick's face and his lips moved in grimaces as he tried to speak. The two men bent closer until they could distinguish Curly's words.

"Silk . . . had . . . to . . . talk . . ." Curly gasped. "Just . . . had . . . to . . . talk . . . We'd of . . . killed . . ." The gasping words choked off. Brick lifted his eyes until they met Thad's own. Both knew what Curly was trying to say. If Silk had not talked, if Silk had not tried to play cat and mouse, Curly Winters would not be dying.

"He . . . had a girl . . . in . . . Flores," Curly said haltingly. "Pearl . . . We was . . . goin' to . . . bleed . . . Krespin . . . Ahhhh!" The voice died away.

Curly's legs stiffened as though he would push himself up, and then relaxed. His head rolled limply toward the right and his mouth sagged open. Brick continued to kneel by Curly's side. Thad stared down at the distorted face and suddenly looked away. He was sick, sick with a retching nausea that would not down. Reaction had set in.

Brick scrambled to his feet. "Why," said Brick, his voice low, filled with amazement, "I lived with them fellows. I shared my blankets with 'em. I . . . For God's sake, kid! Let's get out of here! Let's shift camp an' go!"

CHAPTER XXVI

LAWMAN, FORGET YOUR BADGE

AT NINE o'clock Charlie Farrel came home. A wifeless man, he lived in a small adobe house close by the edge of Las Flores. There was a stable behind the house where Farrel kept a horse, and there were two rooms in the adobe, a kitchen and a bedroom. He preferred to live so rather than to keep a room at a hotel or boarding house and stable his horse in the livery barn. It gave him a certain measure of privacy.

Farrel turned the key in his door and, pushing it open, went into the house. He had had a hard day. Things were piling up on Charlie Farrel and he could not see an immediate end to them. He was tempted to resign and let someone else have the grief; but if he resigned, what else would he do? A man of fifty who has been an officer for thirty years might have a hard time changing his ways.

Farrel scaled his hat across the dark room to where he knew the bed was placed, and proceeding through the darkness, struck a match, located the lamp on the table and lighted the wick. Replacing the chimney, he turned, intending to sit down in the chair beside the table, pull off his boots and relax awhile before he went to bed. Having turned around, he changed his plan. A man was sitting on the bed, Farrel's hat beside him. The man was red headed and had but one arm. Between his knees the redhead's hand loosely dangled a big Colt.

"Well, Charlie?" said the man on the bed.

"What did you come in for, Brick?" Farrel asked quietly, holding himself very stiff and still. "You want to give yourself up?"

Brick Mahoney frowned, not a scowl of hatred or of fear, but rather one of concentration. "I need some help," he said. "I come in to you to get it."

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"Help?"

"Yeah." The dangling gun made a little gesture. "Sit down, Charlie."

Farrel seated himself. His own gun was in a shoulder holster under his left arm. He could reach it and, perhaps, get it, but he did not. Brick was studying the officer with worried blue eyes. "Yo're the only man I know that can help me out," Brick said. "You see it's the kid, Charlie."

Farrel forgot all about the gun under his arm. He leaned forward in his eagerness. "You mean Thad Breathea?"

Brick nodded soberly. "He's made up his mind to kill Dale Krespin an' a man named Prince," Brick said, his voice worried. "An' I can't talk him out of it."

"To kill Krespin an' Prince?"

"That's right. He found out that they rigged a deal on him. Krespin lied about the kid when he said he'd never saw him. Then me an' the boys come back an' took the kid out of jail, an' that made him an outlaw as far as the sheriff's office was concerned. Now then, the kid knows what happened an' he's gone plumb bronc on me." Brick's voice was strangely plaintive. "I can't talk him out of it, neither."

Some of the tightness had left Charlie Farrel's face and he leaned back in his chair. "Brick," he drawled, "I'm all dressed up. I'd like to get some clothes off an' rest awhile. I've had a hard day an' you an' me want to talk a little. How about it?"

Brick's eyes were wary. "I guess so," he agreed. "Only be careful, Charlie."

Farrel stood up. Deliberately he removed his coat and hung it over the back of his chair. The shoulder holster and the butt of its gun jutted out from beneath his arm. Farrel pulled the elastic loop of the holster from his right shoulder, let the leather loop slip down from his left shoulder and, holding the holster by the leather, carried it across the room and hung it on a nail.

His eyes were twinkling as he came back to the chair beside the table. "Now we can talk comfortable," he said.

Brick grinned as he put his gun back into its sheath and relaxed upon the bed.

FARREL put one leg on the table, tilting his chair back and looking at his visitor through narrowed, calculating eyes. "So the kid wants to kill Krespin an' Prince?" he said.

"Uh-huh." Brick was gloomy. "I had a tough time with him too. You see, Charlie, them two hired Silk Gerald an' Curly Winters to hunt up me an' the kid an' kill us. Silk an' Curly found us in Franklin an' told us a big cock an' bull story about a payroll in Gato.

"The kid an' me was plannin' on South America an' I wanted to make a stake so I listened to what they had to say, an' it looked pretty good. We come up across the Pecos an' got clear past the Red River, an' then Silk an' Curly tried to get the job done.

"Silk got to talkin'. He wanted to rub it into me an' he said that Krespin an' Prince had hired them to kill us because the kid had a claim on Krespin's ranch. The kid took a chance and got Silk with a stingy gun that he'd been holdin' out; an' Curly run into some tough luck about that time." Brick broke off. His eyes were on Farrel but the officer could see that Brick was not looking at him. Brick's mind was far away.

"So then?" Farrel prompted.

Brick took a long breath. "So then we moved camp," he said. "We pulled out of there. I had trouble with the kid then an' I've been havin' trouble with him ever since. First off he was all stirred up because he'd killed a man, an' then when I got him calmed down over that he got this other idea in his head.

"The kid's had some pretty tough times an' he lays it all on Krespin. He ain't wrong neither. He's made up his mind he's goin' to walk in on them two an' tell them what they done, an' then kill 'em. There ain't no use of tryin' to tell him it wouldn't work. I told him that we could lay out with a rifle and get the job done, but he wouldn't hear to it. He's bound to give those skunks a chance."

Brick stopped. He had freed his mind of what was in it, and now he waited.

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Farrel carefully fitted his fingers together and locked them in place. He stared at the fingers for a long moment then asked a question. "Where is the kid?"

Brick grinned. "We got a camp," he explained. "I talked the kid into waiting awhile. I told him we'd have to scout the country an' stake out some horses so we could get away, an' we needed some grub. He wanted to get a friend of ours to get it, but he can't talk Spanish an' so I got him to hold down the camp while I come to town."

"To see me?" Farrel asked.

Brick shook his head. "I went up to Krespin's," he admitted. "I didn't blame the kid none an' I thought mebbe I'd take it off his hands. The kid ain't cut out for the business I'm in. He stays awake too much at night worryin'.

"But before I got to Krespin's place I got to thinkin'. The kid's got a claim on that place and I'd like to see him get it. I don't want him to lose out on what he's got comin'. I thought mebbe you could help me out, Charlie.

"The kid isn't bad. That time at the bank, Hoyt Lowell gave him those horses to hold an' we made a mistake comin' back and takin' him away from you. He was goin' to give himself up one time an' Krespin was with the posse an' taken a couple of shots at him. The kid ain't really been in nothin' bad."

There was a plea in Brick's blue eyes. Charlie Farrel unlocked his fingers and reaching out, took a cigar from a box. He tossed the cigar to Brick and reached for another for himself.

"No," he agreed thoughtfully, "the kid ain't bad at all. It's all been a mistake an' Krespin's to blame for it. I know some things too."

"Do you?" Brick paused in the act of lighting the cigar. "You believe me when I tell you that the kid's all right? That he really ain't mixed up in anything?"

Farrel nodded. "I know he hasn't been," he said quietly. "I know that Krespin lied when he said that he'd never seen the kid an' I know that Krespin wants the kid out of the way. There's already been one murder over this thing, Brick. I'm glad that you come in."

THE match burned Brick's fingers and he flipped it away. Farrel struck a match, lighted his own cigar and then got up and gave Brick a light. Returning to his chair, he puffed comfortably, blew the smoke away and looked at Brick.

"You see there was a fellow named Ten High Croates that found a letter the kid lost," Farrel said. "Ten High an' Lulu Black tried to blackmail Krespin. Prince killed Croates but I can't prove it. There's a whole brandin' crew ready to swear that Prince wasn't away from camp but just long enough to go to the ranch an' back. But I know that Prince killed Croates. I'd like to prove it on him, an' I'd like to prove that Krespin was behind it. This business of hirin' Silk Gerald an' Curly Winters is kind of serious too."

"That's what I thought," Brick said with satisfaction.

"Krespin has got plenty to worry about," Farrel said slowly. "So has Prince. They know I've been askin' a few questions an' there's a lawyer down here from Wyoming that's started suit against Krespin for the Breathea kid. This lawyer's named Althen, Wade Althen. He's red hot to find the kid an' get what's comin' to the boy out of Krespin. You know—" Farrel broke off.

"Yeah?"

"I'd like to get Althen down here," Farrel said. "The three of us—" He looked questioningly at Brick.

"Go get him then," Brick said.

Farrel got up and slipped into his coat and vest. He smiled at Brick Mahoney. "I'll be back in thirty minutes," he promised. "Althen is just down at the hotel but he might have to dress."

"I'll wait for you," Brick said, rising and following Farrel to the door. "I'll lock up behind you, Charlie. Somebody might come in an' it wouldn't look good for you if they found me here."

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Farrel nodded, said: "I'll be right back," and went out. Brick turned the key, went to the table and thoughtfully lowered the lamp wick; then, proceeding to the bed again, he sat down and relaxed.

There was no compact between Brick Mahoney, outlaw, and Charlie Farrel, officer. Given another set of circumstances, Brick would run and Farrel follow, intent on capture, living by a certain code. But now they had laid aside the opposition, and joined together to do what was right. Brick puffed on the cigar and tried vainly to blow a perfect smoke ring.

The cigar was a stub when Farrel returned. Brick heard the footsteps coming, heard Farrel's gentle knock and his low voice. Brick unlocked the door and opened it, and Farrel came in with another man.

CHAPTER XXVII

PASTURE FOR FUGITIVES

THE man with Farrel was short and pudgy. When he removed his hat he exposed a bald head surrounded by a ring of gray hair. His face seemed plump and mild, until you noticed the strong bones that made a stubborn bulldog jaw.

"Make you acquainted with Wade Althen, Mr. Mahoney," Farrel said. "Yo're both friends of Breathea's."

Brick and the lawyer shook hands and sat down. Farrel leaned against the table. "Tell Althen what you been tellin' me," he ordered Brick.

Brick began. Tersely he covered the ground again, and Althen listened, nodding from time to time. When Brick paused, he spoke. "You say that the boy has decided to kill Krespin and Prince?" he asked.

"Yeah," Brick said. "He's got it figured that he'll walk right up to them an' accuse them of what they done to him. I'd be with him, of course, but even at that we wouldn't get too far. They know they're guilty an' before the kid ever got a word out they'd cut down on him. An' either the kid or me would get hurt even if we did settle them two. I've tried to tell the kid what would happen, but he won't listen. He's got his mind made up."

"It won't do," Althen said crisply. "If he killed them it would be murder."

"Murder," Brick drawled, "ain't so bad. There's skunks that need killin'; but I don't want the kid hurt."

Althen disregarded the remark. "It seems simple enough," he commented. "If you and Thad were to appear before a court and testify as to this story you've told me, I have no doubt but that the court would order the arrest of Krespin and Prince. I believe that's the solution."

"It might be," Brick agreed, "but there's a catch in it. If I got up in front of a judge he'd sentence me to ninety-nine years in the pen an' a hangin' too. It wouldn't be healthy for me, would it, Charlie?"

Farrel cleared his throat. "Brick is wanted, Mr. Althen," he said. "He's kind of in some other trouble besides this. He just come in because he's a friend of the kid's."

Althen looked from one man to the other, his eyes shrewd. "I'd say he was a very good friend of Thad's," the lawyer commented dryly. "I'd like to shake hands with you again, Mr. Mahoney."

Brick flushed and awkwardly extended his hand.

"And I want to congratulate you, Farrel," Althen said when he had released Brick's hand. "There aren't many officers—"

"Everybody trusts Charlie," Brick interrupted. "We know he's square."

Althen sat down. "We've got to make some sort of a plan," he said. "We have possession of a number of facts, but owing to the circumstances we can't use them. It's a difficult situation."

THERE was a pause in the talk. Charlie Farrel's little bedroom was quiet. Brick shifted restlessly. "I could go over by myself an' kind of talk to Krespin an' this fellow Prince," he suggested. "I started to do that anyhow but I got to thinkin' that maybe it would be blamed on the kid, an' he wouldn't be in the clear.

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Them two need killin' if a man ever did."

Farrel remained silent, but Althen shook his head. "I'm afraid that won't do," he said. "No, there's got to be another way. I think—"

"Here's an idea," Farrel said suddenly. In his slow, drawling voice he outlined his plan. The other two men kept their eyes on his face, listening intently, until he finished.

Then Althen nodded his bald head. "It has possibilities," he agreed.

"An' what do I do with the kid?" Brick complained. "I'm havin' trouble holdin' him in right now. I'll have to take him along. An' who would we get that we could trust? I don't know anybody."

"Morgan Vermillion," Farrel said promptly. "He likes the kid an' wants to help him. He told me so."

There was astonishment on Brick's face. "But the kid told me that Vermillion sent to town to turn him in to the law! The kid—"

"The kid left an' didn't know what Morgan was doin'," Farrel snapped. "Morgan fired Walt James for stickin' his nose into business that wasn't his. Morgan likes the kid."

"Huh!" Brick grunted in amazement.

"Let's work this thing out," Farrel said. "We got an idea. It ought to be all right."

In that small, smoke-filled adobe room the talk went on and on. Brick, seated at the table, scratched with pen upon paper, Althen looking over his shoulder, making suggestions, Farrel occasionally adding a word. Charlie Farrel's box of cigars was depleted. The first gray of morning tinged the east.

"I guess that's it," Brick Mahoney said finally. "Thanks, Charlie."

"It ought to work," Althen said.

"I've got to get some grub and go back." Brick's voice was moody again. "It ain't so bad for you fellows, all you got to do is wait. But I've got the kid on my hands an' I've got to stall him off an' string him along. He's an obstinate little devil."

"You can do it," Farrel said. "We'll be there, right on time."

"Where you goin' to get your grub," Farrel asked, "an' how you goin' to leave town?"

Brick grinned broadly. "I kind of helped myself to your kitchen, Charlie," he answered. "There's a sack out there, ready to go, an' I put my horse in yore shed an' feed him a little grain."

"You had your nerve with you!"

Althen laughed. "And I'm very glad you did," he said. "You'd better leave now, Mr. Mahoney, before it's daylight."

"Well," Farrel said, "all right then. I'll even get yore stolen grub for you."

He stepped to the kitchen. Althen walked across to Brick. For a moment he talked, low-voiced. Brick shook his head. Althen spoke again, insistently. Brick nodded reluctantly and Althen said: "Thad would want it that way."

"Well, all right," Brick consented.

RIDING out of town through the thin morning light, a sack of provisions on his saddle and his horse fresh and strong under him, Brick Mahoney felt more cheerful than he had in many a day.

It was a full day's ride back to the camp where he had left Thad. That was a point in his favor. The day was one gained. But there were other days coming and at thought of them Brick lost all his elation. It was not going to be an easy task to hold Thad down. Staying with the square jawed, silent young fellow who had but one idea, who brooded continually over a killing, was no bargain.

Brick wished that he did not have to go back to camp at once, but knew that he must. He had sold Thad the idea of this trip alone; he had Thad's promise that for the time Brick was gone Thad would remain in hiding; but Brick knew that if he did not return soon Thad would start looking for him, and that was the last thing Brick wanted.

"Got to get there tonight," Brick Mahoney muttered to himself. "If I don't he'll start out an' hunt me. I've already been gone two nights an' a day. I got to get back."

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He considered his horse's head. Brick was riding a big, full barreled bay that was all life and run. The horse worked his ears constantly now forward, now back, pointing one and then the other. "Yeah," Brick growled. "Work yore ears. You don't know nothin' about it. You don't know just how tough this thing is."

Before evening came Brick was south of Las Flores and far enough east to be coming into the cedar breaks above the Rim. Three times during the day's ride he had seen other riders. Two of these he had passed without being seen. The third man had come toward him and Brick had got down from the bay and waved his hat around his head in a slow circle. The rider had taken the hint and moved off. Few men in that time and country disregarded the wave-around. The bay horse was tired, but he still worked his ears.

When the sun went down Brick was descending a canyon, following a little-used road to get below the Rim. Under the Rim, dusk had already come, though there was still sunlight on top. Brick rode out of the canyon, angling north and working along the bottom bench of the Rim, coming presently to another indenture.

Following that, he whistled a long, low note, imitating the call of the California quail. An old quail, followed by her young brood, ran from beneath his horse immediately. Then back down the canyon came an answering call, and Brick rode toward it. He rounded a point, followed up a brief side-canyon where the grass was lush, and stopped. Thad Breathea stepped around a big rock and stood looking up at his friend.

"I was just about ready to start after you," Thad said. "You get the grub?"

"Yeah," said Brick.

"We could have done without it," Thad announced. "Did you see Alfredo?"

"How do you suppose I got the grub? How you been, kid?"

"All right. I stayed in camp most of the time. I went out awhile last night."

"Where?"

"Toward Krespin's."

Brick got down from his horse. "I got some canned stuff an' some coffee an' salt pork," he said. "I'll put my horse with the others."

"They're above camp," Thad was untying the sack from Brick's saddle. "What did you find out, Brick?"

"Not much," Brick answered.

"The crew is in at Krespin's headquarters," Thad told him.

"You went clear up there?" Alarm was in Brick's voice.

"Far enough so that I could see," Thad answered. "Brick—"

"Yeah?"

"I've waited long enough."

Brick walked ahead, leading his horse. Thad followed, carrying the sack of groceries. The camp was just beyond the rock. Reaching it, Brick stopped and began to unsaddle. "You don't just walk in an' kill a man, kid," he announced. "There's things to do first. We've got some time to wait."

"Why?" Thad put down the sack of groceries.

"Because I'm not a damned fool," Brick snapped, pulling off his saddle and dropping it to the ground. "Because I'm goin' to have it fixed so that you an' me will come out of this with our hides whole.

"Here's the plan:

"First we're goin' to rest these horses for two days anyhow. We're goin' to have fresh horses when we leave here. An' we're going to take two horses down to that little *placita* below the river an' leave them there with the storekeeper.

"When this thing comes off we'll leave in a hurry if we leave at all. There'll be men after us an' I'm goin' to put a lot of country between me an' here. An' that's the size of it, kid."

Here was an unanswerable. Thad knew that Brick was entirely right. The horses did need rest; and two fresh horses, thirty miles along their line of flight, grain fed and strong, would be of inestimable value.

"Yeah," Thad agreed reluctantly. "I guess you're right, Brick."

"Yo're damned right, I'm right!" Brick echoed. "Let's get some supper."

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CHAPTER XXVIII

OIL YOUR GUN

BRICK, having outlined a program, carried it through. Between them he and Thad had seven horses, their own mounts, the ones that Curly and Silk had ridden, the two bed horses, and the pack horse. These were in the canyon above the camp. There was water up the canyon and plenty of grass, and the steep rock sidewalls and the sheer drop at the upper end made a natural corral of some eight or ten acres. The horses were doing well, but they needed rest, for they had been pushed fairly hard for two weeks.

There was another thing in favor of the camp besides the pasture: There were no cattle on the range, and Thad and Brick surmised that the locality of their camp was used by some ranchman atop the mesa as a winter country. They were therefore fairly safe from molestation. Cowhands in the summer time generally do not go into their winter pasture. With the precautions Brick and Thad were taking—confining their activities outside the canyon to late evening or very early morning—they felt secure.

For a day after Brick came back they rested their horses. Early the following morning they left the camp, taking with them the bed horses, which would be good enough spare mounts. By noon Thad and Brick had covered the thirty miles to the little *placite* below the river, and then Thad stayed out of sight while Brick took the spare horses in and made arrangements to have them cared for.

He came back after the noon hour, with four tamales for Thad wrapped in an old paper. The tamales were hot enough to keep Thad drinking water for some little time.

Brick was pleased with the results of his trip to the little village. The storekeeper, with a fenced pasture and a supply of grain on hand, had promised that the horses would be fed and kept up every night, and Brick had given him five dollars, with the promise of five more.

"We'll need them at night or of a morning," Brick explained to Thad, "an' that way he'll have 'em up."

The two men did not start back to camp immediately; they waited for the cool of the evening. It was six o'clock before they re-crossed the Red River and they rode into camp when dark had come. Thad went up the canyon to turn the horses they had ridden in with the others, while Brick cooked supper.

Now came the hard part for Brick. The job of moving the two horses and staking them out with the storekeeper had kept Thad's mind occupied; but staying around camp, cooking, eating and loafing, began to tell on him. Thad was impatient and continually fidgeting. His decision to kill Krespin was always in his mind; but several times he found himself thinking about Childress. It was strange and somehow painful to remember her now; it made him all the more uneasy.

But Brick was adamant about moving. "We'll wait till these horses have rested an' put on a little fat," he said firmly. "That's all there is to it."

ON THE fourth day the two quarreled bitterly. Thad accused Brick of over caution. Brick's temper was badly frayed. One word led to another, and finally Thad accused Brick of cowardice.

Brick's flare of temper was instantaneous, and it was not until Thad started up the canyon with the avowed purpose of catching a horse and going to the Lazy 5 at once, that Brick was recalled to his senses. Then he used the oldest of wiles to effect a reconciliation. He announced in an injured tone that Thad did not want to take him along; that a cripple with only one arm would not be of any use.

Thad immediately came back, contrite, and spent the remainder of the day placating Brick. Brick could hardly restrain a grin, though Thad's hot words still rankled in his mind.

By noon of the fifth day there was no restraining Thad. All morning Brick had used every method at his command to

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keep his friend occupied; then while the two munched their cold food, Brick made sudden announcement.

"I think we can go tonight," he said abruptly. "I think tonight's the time. The horses are rested an' we're as ready now as we'll ever be."

Thad sat bolt upright beside the rock against which he leaned, and looked wonderingly at Brick.

Brick nodded. "An' I've been thinkin'," he continued. "I've got a kind of plan worked out."

"What is it?" Thad asked eagerly.

"The thing I haven't liked about this is your idea of just walkin' in on Krespin an' Prince," Brick said slowly. "I've told you that, and I've told you why I didn't like it. I don't think you'd get by with it an' I been wondering why you wanted to do it. The way I've got things figured out, yo're not just sure, is that it?"

Thad could not give a definite answer to the question. He knew that Krespin was the underlying cause of his troubles, that Krespin had tried to have him killed. And yet there was something in Thad that would not let him kill in cold blood, no matter how guilty the man was. But he could not find words to explain that, and so he merely nodded.

"Well then," Brick drawled, "we'll make sure an' at the same time we'll give ourselves a break. Now here's what I've thought we could do: We'll go up there an' reach the place after dark. The crew will be in the bunkhouse an' Krespin an' Prince will likely be together right after supper. We'll hide our horses where we can get them easy, an' we'll go on afoot. Then I'll go in alone—"

"Oh no you won't!" Thad told him. "You won't do that!"

"Now wait a minute!" Brick snapped. "Let me talk. I've got as big a stake in this as you have. Curly an' Silk tried for me just as hard as they tried for you. You keep still an' let me finish!"

Thad subsided. After a moment Brick continued. "I'll go up alone an' call Krespin an'. Prince out on the porch. Then I'll proposition 'em. I'll tell them about Curly an' Silk fallin' down on the job an' that I know where you are; then I'll ask 'em how much yo're worth to 'em.

"They're goin' to answer that an'-you'll have a chance to hear just what kind of people they are. You'll learn a lot more than if you just went in, accused them two an' went to shootin'. And when they've talked enough you'll come up an' we'll settled with 'em, one way or another. Now that's my scheme."

"I don't like it," Thad objected. "I don't like your going alone. Suppose they aren't together? Then what?"

Brick snorted scornfully. "That's the way to get 'em together. If Krespin is alone he'll call Prince so that they can both talk to me."

That was true. Thad knew it.

"An' yo're goin' to hear the whole thing," Brick said, knowing that was sure bait. "You're goin' to hear it all."

Slowly Thad nodded his head.

"All right," Brick said briskly, "this afternoon we'll cache this stuff. We can't take it with us, but there's no use just letting it scatter. Something might slip an' we'll want to come back here.

"There might be too many folks at the place an' we'd have to put it off. We'll eat plenty tonight before we start an' we'll take some cold grub on our saddles an' we'll fill that canteen with coffee. When we leave here, we'll be goin' a long ways an' we'll be goin' fast an' not stoppin' to cook. Let's get fixed up, kid."

AND so that afternoon Brick's plan was carried out. The beds were rolled and put into the fork of a tree. The food was placed in a sack and hung from a limb so that it would be safe from packrats or other marauders.

Everything about the camp was made shipshape and late in the day Brick cooked salt pork for sandwiches and boiled the coffee. At five o'clock they ate, Thad with no appetite, forcing down the food; and by five-thirty they were saddling the two best horses.

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The three horses that remained they turned loose. It had been easy enough to keep the horses together. The pack horse was the boss of the remuda and him they kept hobbled. The others stayed close by him. Finally, Thad removed the hobbles from the pack horse; he would stay in the canyon for a time, and the other two horses would stay with him. Their saddles in place and with everything done, the two men mounted. Brick took a last look around the camp.

"If we have to come back, it'll be here," he said. "If we don't, some rider is goin' to find a lot of stuff he can use when they move the cattle in here come fall. Let's go." He started down the canyon and Thad followed.

They took an easy pace for they had plenty of time. Riding north, they twice crossed water, taking advantage of the creek banks to stay below the skyline. As dusk descended they came to a pasture fence and knew that they had reached the horse pasture of the Lazy 5. Here they paused and Brick, grinning at Thad, let down perhaps a hundred feet of wire, kicking strands loose from the posts and placing a rock on them.

"If they haven't got horses up they ain't goin' to have so easy a time catchin' mounts to chase us," he explained, returning to Thad. "Mebbe their horses will drift through here. It's a good idea, anyhow."

Thad said nothing. Brick seemed to take it for granted that they would be pursued. Indeed he seemed to take this whole thing for granted, the slow ride north, the purpose of the ride, everything. Not so, Thad. Determined as he was, he had found that carrying out his idea, even through these first, harmless steps, was not nearly so easy as thinking about it. He was tense and nervous, tight as as a fiddle string. It was not easy to get ready to kill a man. He did not understand how Brick could be so calm and matter-of-fact. Brick was taking this as though it were all part of a familiar day's work.

"We'll cut across the pasture an' let down some wire on the other side," Brick said easily. "We got plenty of time an' we don't want to come in through the horse pasture anyhow. We want to come down from the west so we can look the layout over."

Thad said nothing and Brick struck toward the west.

Within a few minutes they again came to the fence. Here once more Brick kicked down wire and weighted it with a rock; then, leaving the level country, they struck up toward the Rim and followed along the low first bench, winding in and out among the cedars. Twenty minutes more they rode and then Brick reined in and Thad stopped beside him.

"There's the layout," Brick said, pointing.

CHAPTER XXIX

I'LL SELL MY FRIEND

LOOKING past the cedar behind which they had stopped, and in the direction that Brick pointed, Thad could see the buildings of the Lazy 5 lying under the blue haze of descending dusk. There were lights dotting the house and the bunkhouse, and the barn and corrals were a darkly sprawling blotch close by.

"We can come in from the south," Brick said, "an' leave our horses in that draw behind the corrals. That way they'll be right where we want 'em when we leave."

Thad gulped down something in his throat. When they left! When they left there would be bodies sprawling on the porch or in the house down there. When they left they would be running, guns hot in their hands, pursued. Thad could see Silk Gerald's boots lying in the light from the campfire. He could hear Curly's rasping breathing. He could see . . .

"Why," Brick said in a pleased voice, "the light in the bunkhouse is out. It looks like the boys might be goin' to town. It surely does."

Once more Thad gulped.

"They'd be sittin' around inside playin' pitch or somethin'," Brick continued.

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"Surely they ain't gone to bed this early."

"Brick," Thad's voice was irresolute, "do you think—"

"I think it's goin' to be as easy as rollin' off a log," Brick said cheerfully. "Let's ride down off the hill, kid. I don't want to be ridin' over a lot of loose rock an' boulders in the dark. We can get down an' then wait till it's dark."

"All right," Thad answered, the words clogging in his throat. Brick, apparently, did not notice the strangeness in his companion's voice. They began their hazardous descent.

It was darker at the bottom than it had been on the bench. They wound smoothly in and out through the rocks at the bottom of the bench, and then when the rocks gave way to broken, grassy country, Brick dropped down into a draw and followed along it. Presently he stopped and, dismounting, looped a rein around a clump of bear grass. Thad tied his horse a little distance away from Brick's. He joined his companion, to find Brick searching his pockets.

"Where'd I put my chewin'?" Brick muttered. "I—oh, here it is." He produced his plug, methodically bit off a portion, and restored the plug to his pocket. His jaws moved rhythmically and presently he spat. Thad, taking a few steps up the slope, looked over the top toward the buildings. They were dark. Dimly through the fallen night he saw the outlines of barn, bunkhouse, and outsheds.

"Well," Brick was cheerful but he kept his voice low, "let's go, kid. You stop when I tell you."

Brick moved ahead, Thad following him. They came out of the draw and walked across the sodden grass toward the house. The barn shadow was deep and Brick avoided it. The two men kept to the open.

Along the side of the house opposite the barn they walked and then, reaching the corner, Brick gripped Thad's arm. Thad stopped. He was to stay here, he knew. Brick took two more steps and his boot scraped on hard earth; on the porch above Thad a voice said:

"Who's there?"

From the night Brick answered evenly, "It's Mahoney."

Up on the porch, Krespin spoke. "Come up then," and a rocker creaked as a man moved.

"No," Brick answered. "I'll stay here. You got word from me?"

Thad could not believe his ears. This was fantastic, incredible.

"There's just Ben an' me here," Krespin answered. "I've sent the men off like you wanted."

"That's good," Brick's voice was a level drawl. "We can talk business."

Ben Prince said, "You wrote you knew where the Breathea kid is an' that you could deliver him. Where is he?"

HOT anger flooded Thad's body. Brick had betrayed him. Brick, whom he had trusted, who had brought him here. Who—Thad's hand closed around the butt of his holstered gun. Brick was there in front of him not three steps away.

"He's safe," Brick drawled.

On the gun butt Thad's fingers relaxed. He could wait awhile. He would listen.

"You made a mistake sendin' Silk an' Curly after us," Brick continued after a moment's quiet. "You sent boys to do a man's work. They didn't get the job done but Curly an' Silk told me all about it before it was over with."

On the porch a man gasped. That would be Krespin, for Prince's voice came immediately, smooth and unflurried. "So they didn't get the job done," he said. "Well, Mahoney, let's do business."

"All right," Brick agreed. "Let's do business. I can deliver the goods. What's yore price?"

"What's your price?" Prince countered.

"Five thousand dollars."

Again from the porch came a sharp intake of breath.

Prince laughed. "Too much money," he said. "Young Breathea ain't worth it."

"I think he is," Brick drawled. "He's got a claim on this place. He's blood kin

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to old Jake an' Krespin is a step-son. There's already a suit filed against Krespin on the kid's account, an' you already killed one man over it, Prince. He's worth five thousand all right."

Thad was bent forward, listening intently. It was hard to understand that these men were bargaining coolly for his life. He could not bring himself to believe that Brick . . . then suddenly, with a great flash of relief, he remembered Brick's plan—to make them talk by pretending a doublecross. In those first moments Thad had been so stunned that he had forgotten.

"You know a lot about it," Prince was saying.

"I get around," Brick answered with assurance.

"I'm a little curious," Prince told him. "How did you know I killed Croates, Mahoney?"

"I've got friends that tell me things," Brick answered. "Anyhow you killed him."

"He tried to blackmail us!" Krespin was speaking now. "Ben killed him—"

"Just like I'd kill you, Mahoney, if you tried to doublecross us," Prince interrupted smoothly. "Is five thousand your last word?"

"It's my last word," Brick said. "We ain't tradin' horses, you know. I've got one price an' I don't come back for more. How about it?"

There was a waiting silence and then Prince said, "How about it, Dale?"

Krespin seemed to choke over his answer. "Five thousand dollars," he said. "It's a lot of money."

"But the job is worth it," Brick reminded.

"I . . ." Krespin hesitated. "I . . . all right; five thousand it is."

Thad had heard enough He came from his place at the corner of the porch, walking erect, head held rigid, unaware of anything but the fury in him. Up on the porch Prince said, "Who's that?" sharply, and Brick's voice was harsh as he moved toward Thad.

"Kid! Stay back! Stay back!"

Through his anger Thad heard a man call loudly, the voice coming from the opposite end of the porch. "Yo're under arrest. This is Farrel. Prince—"

THE call was broken by a burst of gunfire. Up on the porch red flame bloomed and explosions beat against the night. Thad felt Brick catch his arm and he tore free from the grasp.

Back of him Brick was yelling something, words that Thad did not hear and did not heed. He took another step, his gun fully lifted now, and then the black sky crashed down, engulfing him. . . .

Thad's head was aching with a steady thumping when he opened his eyes. He was looking directly into a lantern and he closed his eyes hastily against the light. The pain in his head reached out through every part of his body; then gradually it began to subside.

Thad risked opening his eyes again, slowly this time, and saw Morgan Vermillion looking down at him, grinning. Behind Vermillion was another familiar face—Wade Althen's. Thad rolled his head and it hurt, and he was looking at Charlie Farrel. With a start he pushed himself up from the boards on which he lay, panic coming into his eyes.

Charlie Farrel spoke gravely. "Take your time, son. You got a hard bump."

Wade Althen, moving from behind Vermillion, put his arms under Thad's shoulders and lifted, and Thad slowly got up.

Vermillion bent down, picked up the lantern and put it on a table beside the lamp, and Thad saw that he was in a room. His shirt clung wetly to his chest and he pulled it free, looking down at it curiously.

"We doused you with water," Vermillion said conversationally. "Mahoney must have given you a pretty hard lick."

"Brick," Thad said. "He . . . ?"

"Brick," Wade Althen interrupted gravely, "isn't here, Thad. He's gone."

Thad stared about him. Brick had pulled out!

"You see," Althen explained, "he wanted to go to South America, and there were

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some people that didn't want him to leave. He finished his job here and he's gone." The lawyer stopped and looked defiantly at Charlie Farrel. "And I gave him the money to go on," he announced firmly.

Farrel grinned. "I'd figured that out," he said.

"Brick an' me," Thad was still in a daze, the sound of his words seeming to come from some distant source, "came here to—"

"Brick told us," Althen interrupted. "We know what you intended doing, Thad. But you had friends and they made other plans for you. Prince and Krespin are dead."

"I don't . . ." Thad began, and wavered on his feet.

Vermillion pushed a chair under him and Althen, taking a stand in front of the boy, stood with feet wide-spread and looked down.

"You don't understand and you don't know what has happened," he said. "I'll tell you, Thad.

"Brick Mahoney left you in camp. He said that he was going to town to get food, but really he came to Las Flores to see Mr. Farrel. Brick Mahoney is your friend, and he knew what you intended to do. And he knew that it would be murder, according to the law. So he came to Mr. Farrel and Mr. Farrel called me in and we made a plan. With what Gerald and Winters had told Mahoney, and what we already knew, we believed—"

"But—" Thad's eyes were wild as he interrupted. "Brick didn't—"

"Mahoney assured us that he killed both those men in self defense," Althen said sternly. "He said that you could vouch for the fact. Now please listen to me, Thad. We believed that Prince had killed a man named Croates. We could not prove it because Prince had an alibi, but Croates had attempted to blackmail Krespin with the lost letter your father had written.

"Mr. Farrel was anxious to prove that murder, so Mahoney offered to come here and bargain with Krespin and Prince for your life. Mr. Farrel and Mr. Vermillion and myself were to be hidden nearby and listen to the conversation.

"Mahoney wrote Krespin and our scheme was carried out just as we had planned. But you almost spoiled it. You started out from where you were hidden and Mahoney had to stop you. I heard him call to you but you kept right on, so he knocked you out with the barrel of his gun.

"Prince resisted arrest when Mr. Farrel called to him, and was killed. Dale Krespin died sitting in his chair and there is no mark on him. Apparently his heart was bad." The pudgy little lawyer stopped. He had been talking to Thad exactly as a teacher might lecture a pupil.

THAD'S gaze was centered upon the floor as he tried to put things in order, tried to comprehend what Judge Althen had told him.

"An' everything's all right, son," Morgan Vermillion said. "You aren't wanted by the law any more. You've got a clean bill of health. Ain't that right, Charlie?"

"That's right," Farrel agreed. "You're in the clear, son."

"Brick's gone?" Thad asked. He could not quite realize that Brick Mahoney was not with him.

Althen seemed to read some implied criticism in the question. "Brick Mahoney is the best friend you ever had or ever will have!" he snapped testily. "He stayed until this thing was finished. He put his own head into a noose to keep you from committing murder or being killed. He's gone. And I'm glad he's free and that he got away!"

Farrel's lips twitched into a tight smile as he looked at the lawyer. "You ain't the only one," he drawled. "An' Judge—"

"Yes?" Althen snapped.

"I didn't want Mahoney very bad," Farrel concluded softly. "There's a lot of things to do around here before this mess is cleaned up. We've got to go to town as soon as it's light enough to travel. Can you fellows give me a hand?" He

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included Althen and Vermillion in his glance.

Vermillion nodded, but Althen turned toward Thad Breathea. "How about—" he began.

"Come on, Judge," Farrel ordered, nodding his head toward the door. "I'll need you, too." He walked out, Vermillion and Althen following him.

Charlie Farrel knew that there were times when a man needed to be alone to think things out, to recover from shock and clear his dazed mind and return to normal thinking once more. The footsteps of the three echoed in the hall as Thad Breathea sat stock still and stared blankly at the wall. Gradually the thoughts began to order themselves in his mind.

He was free. No more running away, no more pursuit, no more stealing through the night, no more riding the rims and the pinnacles. Free and clear.

CHAPTER XXX

LETTER FROM YESTERDAY

THERE was snow in the plaza of Las Flores and the cottonwood trees were gaunt skeletons of themselves. Thad Breathea, coming up from the courthouse, stopped on the corner and looked across the square.

There, opposite where he now stood, beyond the snow covered grass, a kid had held three horses short months ago.

As Thad stood there on the corner, remembering, Shorty Coventry came from the post office. Perceiving Thad, he made bowlegged progress toward his friend. As administrator of the estate of Jake Breathea, deceased, Morgan Vermillion had placed Shorty at the Lazy 5. Everyone knew Morgan Vermillion, everyone trusted him. Thad remembered how the judge had smiled as he said: "I appoint you administrator, Mr. Vermillion. I have no doubt but that you can straighten out all this affair."

Shorty strode up to Thad, stopped, and from the pocket of his sheepskin, produced two letters.

"I got the mail," he said. "I had a letter from Morgan. They want us to come over for Christmas."

Thad took the letters and nodded.

"Does that mean we'll go?" Shorty asked.

"Yeah," Thad agreed, "you just bet we'll go! Charlie is going to have supper with us tonight, Shorty."

Shorty grinned. "Charlie is kind of celebratin'," he said. "I heard that Lon Popples had been let out as marshal."

Thad smiled and ripped the envelope open. The letter was from Wade Althen, and after a brief discussion of certain business connected with the estate, it concluded with an invitation to spend Christmas with him at Fort Blocker. If Thad could not come, then Althen would take the train to Las Flores and spend Christmas with Thad. Thad's smile broadened. He would write to the judge and tell him to come up to Las Flores. They would all go to the Flying V Bar for Christmas.

"That other letter has got some kind of a foreign stamp on it, Thad," Shorty said. "Save it for me, will you?"

Thad nodded as he ripped open the other envelope. Unfolding the letter he read the scrawled page.

Dear Kid:

I got here all right. I come down on a boat that hauled some registered bulls and we was both seasick. I am sorry I had to hit you on the head but you would of run out and gotten yourself shot so I put my handkerchief around my gun and hit you.

I am going to hook up with a big outfit down here to run their purebred herd of shorthorns. They don't think my one arm is a handycap and they treat me fine. If you want to write me my address is 55 Calle Laguna Hermosa, care of Sr. Cristobal M y D Benevides, Buenos Aires, Argentina, S. A. That is some address.

I wish now we had done like we planned in Franklin and come here together. We would of had a lot of fun. Some day you and me will get together again. No hard feelings about the head.

Your friend,

Brick.

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"Who's it from?" Shorty asked.

"Brick," Thad answered, a distant look in his eyes.

"Oh," said Shorty. Then he grinned a little and handed over another letter. "I was holdin' out on you," he said. "Here's somethin' maybe you'd like to look over."

Thad took it, puzzled. The handwriting was much smaller than Brick's, but a little childish, too.

Dear Thad:

My father told me your real name and all about you, and mother says she knew all the time that you weren't an outlaw. I didn't think you were, either. But the reason I am writing this is to ask you to come over and spend Christmas with us. It would be nice, I think, and I promise not to ask you about Texas. You can tell me about Wyoming instead. Please try to come.

Your friend,

Childress.

Thad folded the letter slowly and stared at the snow swirling in the plaza. The two letters were side by side in his mind, very clear; and it took him a moment or two to understand what they meant.

Brick had said that some day they would get together again, but Thad realized that probably they never would. He could accept that knowledge now. But it was good to know that somewhere there was a man like Brick, who went with you and was beside you always when you looked.

Thad was able to put the two letters in their right places now. The one from Brick would stay in his mind for good, but it belonged to a past that Thad was finished with. And the other letter, he knew for sure, belonged to the future.

Thad turned to his companion. Shorty was making a great show of not watching him, and Thad grinned. "Let's go," he said. "Charlie will be waiting at the restaurant."

FATE WOVE A RUG

There are three of them, a Parsee saint, a penniless American and a Persian boy; and the perilous course they must follow is traced in glowing purple and green on a carpet that was fashioned on the loom of the gods. In the desert reaches of Iran these three shall meet the tyrant Iskender, called Satan. Beginning a unique and brilliantly colorful novel of Persia, by

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The Chinese called him the friend of their country and a great warrior; they prayed that the god of luck would ride on his shoulder. In truth, this American needed heavenly protection, for he dared to play a savage game of cat-and-mouse with Nippon's feline Colonel Sinister. An exciting novelet of the Chinese war, by

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COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JANUARY 20

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YOU will be interested to know that one of our authors is occupied these days with the grim business of war. John Kent is the pen name of a British army officer who was ordered to the Front several months ago.

This week is Mr. Kent's first appearance in ARGOSY, although he has published a number of stories in other American magazines. We were very much afraid that Mr. Kent's military duties would mean no more fiction for us, but recently we were surprised and delighted to receive another story from him. It's a highly entertaining tale of India, and you'll be reading it very soon.

One of our correspondents isn't satisfied with ARGOSY from the esthetic point of view, and he has some interesting suggestions to make. In answer to a request of his, we say that Captain Hornblower and Doctor Kildare will be back with you just as soon as their respective creators cooperate.

RALPH J. CAESAR

I am not much of a letter writer, but after the many years I have kept quiet I consider it time for me to step up and put in my ten cents worth.

My complaint is not about the stories; they are as good as ever, especially Forester.

But I do have a complaint about your illustrations and rough edges. They are terrible.

Why not follow the lead of one of your competitors, who has enlarged the magazine and makes fine use of illustrations?

Of course dressing ARGOSY up would cost money and mean an increase in the price. But I am sure you would hear nothing but cheers from your loyal readers.

When are Kildare and Hornblower going to make a return appearance?

Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

WE ARE highly gratified to learn that somebody approves of the change in ARGOSY's backstrip.

ARMAND ROBERTS

Whom shall I give the credit to for that brilliant idea of printing the names of a few of the authors where the old "Adventure—Romance—Mystery" used to be?

Again I praise the brain behind that idea. You should be awarded a medal for that act. Keep up the improvements.

Manchaug, Mass.

MARGARET EDWARDS

Couldn't one of your masters of prose turn out a really spine-chilling goose pimple epic? I thought "Remember Tomorrow" might do, but it's settled down into a nice ordinary ARGOSY thriller—which of course means it's out of the ordinary. I'm like the boy in Grimm's who didn't scare, I guess—I laughed my head off at Dracula even at a tender age. But there must be someone on your staff who could equal Sheridan Le Fann's "Green Tea." That did curdle my blood. I enjoyed the sensation. Like your stuff very much—especially the more nit-witted humor such as Omega.

Just to satisfy my curiosity—name one of your authors who is a female. I dare you!

Bronx, N. Y.

WE'LL take that dare, Miss E. Not long ago we published a short short by Jay Clark, a lady. You must remember that swell mystery serial, "Lost House," by Frances Shelley Wees; and we've had stories by Virginia Dale and Kate Warren Hayden during the last year or so. As a matter of fact, you'd be surprised to learn how many female authors prefer to masquerade as men in ARGOSY.

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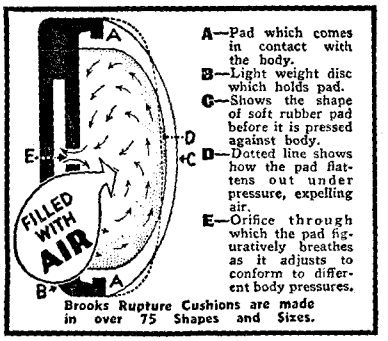
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D
C
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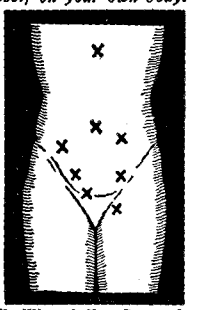
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